

IN THE SWEET
SPRING TIME










IN THE SWEET SPRING-TIME.

VOL. II.



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IN THE SWEET SPRING-TIME

A LOVE STORY.

BY

KATHARINE S. MACQUOID

AUTHOR OF

“PATTY,” “DIANE,”

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BOOK I.

(CONTINUED.)

SPRING.



IN THE SWEET SPRING-TIME.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TELEGRAM.

IN the evening, when the friends returned, they walked home through the leafy lane beside the river.

They walked along silently. The air of the river, and, perhaps, the fatigue of rowing had quieted Oliver's excitement. Maurice's thoughts were full of Martha, and of the wrench which he knew this marriage must cause in her life.

They had just come in sight of the cottage, and they saw Mr. Venables waiting at the gate. Oliver hurried forward to him. At the sound of footsteps Mr. Venables looked round, and

before he spoke he handed a telegram to Oliver.

"I called at your office an hour ago," he said, "and found your clerk in great perplexity—not knowing where to find you—so I took upon myself to deliver this on the chance of your being at home. It is very urgent, I fear."

"It's a strike." Oliver had lost his excitement, and spoke as coolly and collectedly as if the sheet of pink paper he held did not contain the reversal of the warm hopes he had been feeding on. "I must go down at once. I was coming to see you, Mr. Venables, to-morrow. I had understood you were not expected till evening. Now I must wait, or write. This business will not be settled easily."

"I am sorry to hear that, but I'll wish you good-speed. I'm only in your way now."

Oliver shook hands, and then hurried in.

"If I can be of any use, you will tell me?" Maurice said, as he followed.

Oliver seemed to take no heed. He went upstairs to find Martha.

"Martha, where are you?" he called out.

He met her at the top of the staircase.

“There has been some misunderstanding at Awlford,” he said. “I think we had better go there for a few weeks. I must stay there, and perhaps you will wish to be with me—it may be anxious work, and I have no time to write letters—will you go with me now, or follow me to-morrow?”

She stopped to think for a moment, then she said, calmly, “I will go with you now. I can be ready as soon as you are.”

“That’s right?” said Oliver, with an approving look, and he went down to Maurice.

“If you will just put my papers straight in there,”—he pointed to his working-room—“lock the room up, and keep the key in case I want to send for anything, and if you will get us a cab—which, I fear, is no easy matter—I shall be much obliged.”

Then he called Jane, and gave her money and directions—“Go up to my sister,” he said, “she may want help, for we cannot go to-night unless we catch this train.”

Maurice found a cab more quickly than he

expected. Oliver's rapidity had disturbed his friend ; he could not see the need of dragging Martha away in this manner—of what possible use could she be at Awlford ?

When he came back, he found Martha standing ready in the porch.

"I was coming to talk to you this evening," he said ; "Oliver has been telling me his hopes."

"I have seen her," Martha said, but even Maurice could not guess from her face whether she liked Miss Ralston.

"It is too soon yet to ask your opinion," he said ; "that sort of anticipated relationship is repugnant at first—it is unnatural to feel obliged to be intimate with a stranger. Now let me put you in ; here comes Oliver."

Oliver did not hurry in after his sister, he came back and stood within the gate with Maurice.

"I shall write to you as soon as I can," he said ; "if anything happens, you will take care of Martha, I know."

Then the look of pained surprise in his friend's face touched him.

“You don’t know the temper of these lads as I do, and as Martha does. I take her because I know she would be painfully anxious if she stayed behind; at Awlford she can know I am safe from hour to hour. I am sure she ought to go, but I have not told her the risk.”

He pressed Maurice’s hand, told the driver he had no time to lose, and they started.

Maurice stood looking after them; he felt dazed by the sudden hurried ending of this dreamy day. Outwardly, all had been full of sunshine, and of the charm of ever-changing beauty, a double change of scene and of light as the boat and the hours progressed.

Something in Martha’s face had puzzled him; she looked so strangely unwilling to go away, and yet she had not given a backward glance at her parrot or her canaries; there had been a yearning sadness in her face, deeper, he was sure, than could have been created in Martha by any household pet; and yet she was going with Oliver. Oliver’s thoughtfulness too had surprised Maurice; he had not fancied his friend would have had so much care for his

sister in such an intensely critical moment.

“If they get at the machine and break it up, there goes the labour of years, and such things have happened often ; and, if this happens, will Oliver’s purpose of marrying hold?” Again Maurice turned sternly from the temptation that offered itself. He was already in sight of The Elms, and Reuben Tew was standing outside the gate enjoying the fine evening. When he saw Mr. Penruddock, he went forward a few steps under the old wall and beamed so benevolently through his spectacles that Maurice was obliged to stop and speak to him.

“Well, sir,” Reuben gave him a bland smile of welcome, “you’re coming to see us ; that’s right ; we’re glad of visitors to cheer us up, though our young ladies is always cheerful.”

He smiled again in an encouraging way, and stood aside to let Mr. Penruddock pass in at the gate.

“No, thank you, I have just seen Mr. Venables ; I’m not going in.”

Mr. Tew looked still more encouraging, as if

ready to pat Maurice's shoulder ; then he gave a confidential nod.

“ You just go in, sir ; I've lived longer in the world than what you have done, an' in all my experience I never see no good in bashfulness. Bless you, sir, half the world doesn't know what their heads was placed on their shoulders for—they uses 'em for looking, an' hearing, an' ornament, not for thinking, an' so the most of 'em takes people at what they rates themselves. They judge by outside. Never you be bashful, sir, it don't pay in the long run.”

Maurice laughed.

“ All right,” he said ; “ I have no time to go in to-day. Good evening,” and he went on.

Mr. Tew looked after him, his chin raised itself, and his nose wrinkled with disapprobation.

“ That's what I call a clean throwing away of chances ; just now, too, when the other one's safe out of the way for a week or so. Bless my soul, this chap don't know how to go to work ; he's far more Miss Kitty's sort than what t'other one is, an' yet t'other one will have her. If I was a young woman—which, thank God,

I ain't—I should turn up my nose at a sweetheart which showed himself so backward as this one does. Lord help us! young men went to work differently in my time; I fancy now it's the young woman as makes the most running, an' the more a man stands off the more eager she runs after him." He paused here, and looked ashamed of himself. "Our Miss Kitty for sure wouldn't seek any man; she's in no hurry for a husband, but I ain't so sure of her sister. They's as different as two apples often is off of the same tree."

CHAPTER XVIII.

OLIVER IS DETERMINED.

“**O**LD Hawkes,” as Oliver called him, had a concealed triumph in his face when Mr. Burridge walked into his room early next morning.

“Good morning,” said Oliver. “We got in too late last night for anything but beds at the hotel. Now, what’s this row about?”

“I suppose,”—Mr. Hawkes smiled—“I might ask you the question—you are looked on as the disturber of peace here?”

Oliver’s temper rose.

“If you had not been in such a confounded hurry—but I’ll see the men myself. Who are they?”

This time Mr. Hawkes laughed. He was a short, broad man; and he threw himself back in his chair as if his laugh was an enjoyment.

Oliver pressed his lips firmly together; but he waited for the other to speak.

“My good fellow,” Mr. Hawkes said, “they are all the hands, except Cooper, Lumley, Slater, Ford, and the rest who were with us the other night.”

“How did it get wind?” Oliver said, imperatively. Hawkes winced, but he was obliged to answer.

“That’s more than I can tell you. Next morning there was not a soul in the place except the men I have named, and each of them had already received a threatening notice.”

There was a silence.

“What do you propose to do?” said Oliver.

“My good fellow, what a question! We were doing well enough. We can but let well alone; news travels fast enough in Awlford. As soon as it’s known that we were merely trying an experiment, which we don’t intend to persevere with,”—he looked hard at Oliver’s

stern face—"they'll all come back like a flock of sheep."

There was a pause; then Oliver said,

"Is this Mr. Fildon's opinion also?"—Oliver's face was like a thunder-cloud, and his voice did not sound pleasantly in Mr. Hawkes's ears. Mr. Hawkes was the senior partner, but Mr. Fildon was by far the richest man of the two; he was also much more popular.

"I expect so;" but Hawkes's voice was not confident, and Oliver turned on his heel. But he stopped just as he was going out.

"No," he said; "I'll see him and you together, Mr. Hawkes. I suppose we can send for him?"

Mr. Hawkes rang a bell, and sent a lad to ask Mr. Fildon to step that way.

There was silence till the door opened, and a tall, pale man came in. He had fair hair, and a calm, interesting face; but at sight of Oliver his clear, colourless eyes deepened into blue, and he shook hands heartily.

"I'm glad to see you, Burridge,"—he spoke with much more refinement than Mr. Hawkes

had done. "Come down to face it, as I thought you would. Now what do you think of the state of affairs? What's the best thing to do?"

Oliver hesitated. He believed that Mr. Fildon was well disposed towards him; but still he might perhaps only be drawing him out, and would laugh at him afterwards.

But what was the use of self-reliance if it failed him at such a time as this; for he felt intensely that on his own power at this moment depended, not perhaps his success, but success without the delays inevitable on beginning all over again with strangers.

"I don't know what is the best thing," he said, firmly; "but I can see only one thing to be done. Double the wages of the men who stand by us, if the others hold off, and send for some hands from Botley, or some quiet place as far off as that. No use to try in Awlford, we shall only have riots. Once we've carried it through, they'll sober down, and come round."

Mr. Fildon smiled; but he shook his head.

"Well, we can try," he said; "but, meantime, take care of yourself, Burridge. There's a story

going about that you're from the south, and this has increased the feeling against the improvement. Will you come back with me to my house? It's nearer than the hotel, where I suppose you are."

"Yes, I'm there with my sister. No, thank you, Mr. Fildon, I'll not come back with you. I want to speak to these fellows. I must tell them my father was a Yorkshireman."

"For God's sake, don't try it. Look here!" He handed Oliver a dirty slip of paper. "This was pinned outside the gate this morning."

Oliver read it; it was a threat that, if the new improvement was again tried, every wheel in it should be broken as small as the bones should be in the interloper's body.

Oliver's eyes sparkled, and Mr. Fildon saw that he had gone the wrong way to work.

"If you provoke a riot," he said, "there is no saying where it ends. Is your arrival known, do you think?"

Oliver looked grave.

"I fancy so. Last night, as we were going into the hotel, I saw two men hanging about,

evidently watching arrivals. At the time I took no notice, but I expect they were on the look-out."

"Then you will surely be followed home. You see, although you are popular among the hands, or, rather, you were so, yet you have been so much away these last months that you come back almost like a stranger among us. Why not stay here?—you can easily have your meals sent in."

"And let them see I am afraid. No, Mr. Fildon, that's not the way to deal with Yorkshiremen—not my way, at least; but we're losing time."

Hawkes had stood listening silently; he did not want Oliver to come to positive harm, and yet he wished him and his improvement well out of Awlford, if it was to stop work in this way.

"One moment," he called out. "Isn't it much simpler and much safer to give the thing up?"

Fildon looked with some curiosity at the young man. Oliver walked up to Hawkes; he was excited, but his outward manner was calm.

“Let there be no mistakes, Mr. Hawkes,” he said, sternly; “if my life is spared that improvement must succeed, only it will not succeed in your firm unless you pledge yourself to support it; you can choose before I go out. If I come to grief, you are bound to nothing, but we must try it again before to-morrow; if I succeed, the new machinery will remain here. Is this agreed?”

Mr. Fildon laid his hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“Hawkes does not mean it,” he said; “I stand by the improvement, but I ask you again to consider the risk of going out alone.”

“All right,” Oliver answered; “my sister is at ‘The Lion,’ remember.” He nodded, smiled, and went out, saying to Mr. Fildon—“I will call on you this afternoon.”

Oliver went on unmolested till he reached the High Street. He came into this through a very narrow lane, and he fancied that he saw pale, angry faces looking down on him from some of the windows of the houses in this lane. But no one spoke to him, and the High Street

looked as quiet as it usually did in work-time as he passed into the hotel. He had thought of going into lodgings, but on reflection he decided that it was better Martha should stay here. She was not in the sitting-room when he reached it, and he was going along the passage to her own room in search of her, but as he passed his bedroom door she opened it, and beckoned him in. He had scarcely time to see how white her face was, when she pointed to a paper pinned on to his toilet-cover.

“What does this mean?” she said.

Oliver stooped to read it. The beginning was to the same effect as the warning shown him by Mr. Fildon, but this went on more fully. “Leave us alone,” it said, “and cleare from this place quickly; vengeance will come sudently; it will com like a thunder-clap.” Below this was a rough sketch of a coffin.

Oliver smiled.

“It’s only a threat. What cowards the fellows must be,” he said, “to fancy I care for such skulking threats! I don’t believe it’s done by our men at all; there’s some precious agi-

tator, a London man, probably, at the bottom of this."

"Why did you not tell me?" Martha said; "did you think *I* was a coward, Oliver?"

She stood very erect, her white face framed by the halo of her loosened hair; for she had come into Oliver's room to seek for something while she was arranging it, and the heavy red-gold masses hung much lower than usual.

"No"—he looked at her earnestly,—“you could never have so ignoble a feeling as cowardice. I meant to tell you as soon as I knew what was really to be dreaded; there was no use in raising useless alarm by my own misgivings. Look here, Matty; if I can get the first word with these fellows, I know I'll bring 'em round; the danger is only this—they may knock me down before I can get them to hear me.”

Martha's fingers had twisted themselves together while he spoke, but now her hands fell each beside her, and she looked hopefully at her brother.

"You will get them to listen," she said; "you have been among them, you have shaken them

by the hand, you have shown them that you think they are the same flesh and blood as ourselves. When we were down here before, I found out, by what Jane told me, that what the people feel so much is the seeing the masters, some of them scarcely a generation back the same as themselves, driving about now in carriages, living in big fine houses, setting up for gentle-folks, without a grain of feeling for the wants they may have felt themselves, or at least must have seen in their grandfathers' homes."

Oliver shook his head.

"That's all right and true enough, but it's only the old story of wrong between classes; want of sympathy, the rich forgetting to put themselves in the place of the poor when they are considering a strike or a demand for increased wages, and *vice versâ*; for, mind you, the working-man, though he's far more enduring than his master, is twice as narrow-minded. No, the real difficulty in my way—and mind you, Martha, it's a difficulty too little realised by governing powers, from ministers down to

employers of servants—is the tendency of the half-educated mechanic to exaggerate facts. Even a reading mechanic frequently only cultivates his imagination at the expense of reason. Depend upon it, the smaller a man's circle is the more undue the size he will allow to a grievance, simply because it is perhaps the one important fact in his squalid, monotonous life that requires thought; there is nothing to balance or efface it, it becomes monstrous, and when the mind is heated by excitement, a monster that can only be put down by violence.”

Martha had stood looking at Oliver while he talked out his ideas, but she had not listened to the end of his sentence.

“I have thought of a way,” she said. “Let me go out with you. They will not be violent before a woman, and this will give you time to speak.”

Oliver laughed.

“I should have thought you knew Awlford men better,” he said. “I don't imagine they'll show any feeling unprovoked—they are biding their time now to see what account we make of

their dirty bits of paper ; directly we try the machinery again, there will be mischief."

"But surely, after a while, when they see that its object is not to dispense with labour, but to produce more finished work, they will come round."

"Now you are coming to my monster," he said ; "and of all people, Martha, I believe you are the one to have sympathy with these poor fellows. Heaven only knows what they have imagined about this improvement, but the effect resolves itself into one word, Prejudice, as red-hot a feeling as Bigotry in religion. I fully expect there are dozens of good enough men in Awlford who would say hanging was just all I could look for ; but what's the use of talking. We can't hope to escape being spied on, and it may be they will attack the machine to-night, when they hear we're going to stand our ground."

"Let me go with you," she said. "They will not touch me, and I have no fear but for you."

Oliver patted her shoulder.

“Good, brave girl! but do you really think I would let you mix yourself up in the risk,” he said. “I brought you here because there is always a chance in such things of exaggerated reports, and I could not be sure what you might hear in London; but you must keep quite distinct from me. Besides, I don’t believe you ever spoke to one of these fellows.”

Martha sighed.

“I know a few, I used to know some of them and their wives; but I wish I had had more courage to talk last year, for I fancied the men did not like me.”

“Just like your fancies about yourself, you old goose.” But he kissed her fondly, and told her he should not go out again till the afternoon, when he had to go and see Mr. Fildon.

“Fildon has some sympathy,” he said, “but then, being more refined, he spends his leisure in intellectual tasks and pursuits; he does not cultivate the acquaintance of his work-people, and, after all, perhaps he can’t. They are very proud, and perhaps they would shrink from visitors as much as you do, Martha.”

"There's no doubt of it," she said earnestly. "I know exactly how they must feel. Just think of all their poor make-shifts, their bare homes being exposed to eyes accustomed to see every necessary and luxury kept in good order, and then fancy being advised and set to rights by such people. Oh, I can sympathise entirely with any rudeness shown by the poor to the rich." She gave a shiver of disgust and drew herself up.

"There's *your* monster coming out," Oliver laughed; "but I think the sooner we get dinner out of the way the better, as I have a long afternoon before me; only, Martha, don't let prejudice shut your eyes to truth; there's a great deal of tyranny in the working-man's prejudice, let me tell you, and I am no more disposed to submit to the tyranny of a mechanic than I am to that of his employer."

Martha sighed. She felt very anxious. She knew her brother's determination, and she saw that he did not regard the warning on his table as a mere empty threat; there must be an

outbreak, she thought, and what chance had one man against perhaps twenty or thirty?

She was very silent through the dinner, but Oliver seemed in his usual spirits.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE OUTBREAK.

MR. FILDON came with Oliver to his hall door. A handsome, well-to-do-looking door, with deep red panels, picked out with black, and a large shining brass knocker. The floor of the hall was tiled with gay colours, blue, white, yellow, and green, making an elaborate, flower-like effect, rather out of harmony with the imitation red granite and yellow marble of the walls. But everything was costly, and suggestive of lavish expenditure.

“Well,” Mr. Fildon repeated, “I say again, take care of yourself. I agree with you that the more fearless we are the more chance we have of influencing the men. If you had been

here the experiment would not have been tried at night."

"There has been the mistake," Oliver said, gravely.

Mr. Fildon reddened.

"Yes. I am not ashamed to own it. I let myself be talked into it, but it went against me. However, this daylight trial will show we are in earnest, and that we are fearless. At ten o'clock to-morrow, then."

Oliver nodded, and they parted.

He had stayed longer than he thought with Mr. Fildon, and now, as he came into the road again, it was not so deserted. Mr. Fildon's house was about a quarter of a mile out of the town, but the smoke from so many chimneys had robbed this bit, which should have been country, of all freshness and beauty. The hedge on one side the road was stunted and dingy, and there was no sign of grass or wild flowers beneath it, only dried mud from the road.

A group of women passed Oliver as soon as he came out of the carriage gates. They had

shawls thrown over their heads and shoulders in the graceful fashion of manufacturing districts, but the faces beneath the shawls were not specially attractive. They looked coarse and dirty. The women just glanced at him, and exchanged remarks on his handsome face, but they did not look back. To them he was plainly only a stranger. As he came nearer the town he noticed a group of three or four men lounging together with their hands in their pockets. They all glanced at him, scowled, and turned away. Very soon he came to two more; he recognized these as Kirby and Crofts, two men he had been much thrown with formerly, when he had been clerk to Messrs. Hawkes and Fildon, but before he could nod or speak the men turned their backs on him.

Oliver's impulse was to go up and speak, and then he hesitated. By doing this he might be precipitating the outbreak which he hoped to avert, and as he looked on up the road, which a little further on assumed the proportions of a street, he saw many more of these dark knots of men gathered at the corners of side lanes—for the

small dwellings and cellars in which the mill hands lived were mostly at this end of the town, swarming at the back of the principal thoroughfare. Some of the men gave scowling, side-long glances as he passed.

This sight checked his idea of conciliation. It seemed rash to make any such attempt so far from any place where he was known, or could hope for help, against such overwhelming numbers, and, although evening was coming on, there was no policeman to be seen.

Oliver felt puzzled as to the meaning of this systematic look out; and then it occurred to him that the workmen no doubt anticipated the masters' intention of seeking for fresh hands. No placards had been issued, for Mr. Fildon had suggested that it would be safer to advertise in the local newspaper of some town at a distance from Awlford; but, as Oliver foresaw, this prudence would be of no avail. The poor fellows coming in would be threatened back, and ill-treated if they persisted in offering themselves. Every step he took convinced him that a personal appeal could not make things worse, and might remove some of the prejudice which

their ignorance held between these men and their rightful judgment.

“Why do I not stand out in the street and speak to them? I am growing a coward, surely.” And then the thought of Martha checked him, and he went on in silence past the last group.

All at once there came from the narrow side street he was crossing—so narrow that it was dark there compared with the broader space where he walked—a tall figure. As she reached the corner the light fell on her pale face, and he saw it was Martha. He checked his surprise, and they went on side by side till there was no one in sight; then Oliver spoke.

“Good heavens!” he said, sternly. “How could you do such a foolish trick as this?”

“I was too anxious to stop in,” she said, meekly, “and I—I came out. Why should not I walk home with you, Oliver?”

She had been waiting for him more than an hour, but she did not tell him this. She had gone round and round, changing her place frequently so as not to attract notice, wholly unconscious that every passer-by had remarked

the pale, noble face and tall figure, and had wondered who the strange lady was; for, when Martha had been at Awlford, her stay had been only temporary, and she had lived at the other side of the town. Till her mother's death she had stayed with her at Deeping.

Oliver frowned heavily.

"If I had thought you would have so little self-control," he said, angrily, "I should have left you at the cottage. You not only risk yourself, but you make these fellows think I am afraid of them."

Martha's eyes opened widely, and then contracted with sudden pain. She saw, all at once, the truth of his words. The strong hunger of her love—which had driven her out to seek Oliver, and shield him from harm, as she had so often shielded him when he was a little lad—had blinded her to all else.

"Yes," she said, meekly. "I see I am wrong. Shall I linger behind you, or go on first?"

It was too late. Just as she spoke, they had reached another small side-street of this dirty

quarter, and a few steps down it stood a larger group of men than Oliver had yet encountered. Their pale faces showed haggard and stern out of the gloom of the street, and instead of turning their backs on him, as the rest had done, they all faced round, and advanced to the top of the street.

If he had been alone, Oliver could not have resisted this opportunity, but he was anxious to place Martha in safety, so they passed on. They were still some distance from the hotel, but, as the way was clear in front, Oliver thought they had best remain together. They had been seen, and it might excite attention if he were now to separate from Martha. He did not believe that she would be molested, but the angry faces he had just passed made him unwilling to lose sight of her. It was growing dark, and there might be drunken fellows about. These thoughts passed so rapidly that he had decided, in crossing the street, not to separate from his sister.

He was just about to say, "We will keep together," when a shout of derision rose from behind him :

“See, the coward, he’s got his missus to shelter behind !”

Oliver’s head sank on his chest, he ground his teeth and clenched his hands, but he dared not yet leave Martha. He went on doggedly beside her, and a hiss of contempt followed.

Martha did not speak ; she held her head higher, her cheek flushed a little, and her lips pressed so tightly that they only showed like a red line. Her steps quickened involuntarily, but Oliver walked yet more slowly.

“Don’t hasten,” he said, and they went on in silence.

They were near the inn now, less than five minutes more would take Martha there, and Oliver stopped. He had not turned his head, but he knew that a tramp of footsteps had followed them ever since that outcry.

“Go on,” he said, calmly. “I will follow—it is better to separate now.”

Martha’s eyes were keen with anguish, her lips parted quivering—

“You will follow ? You’ll do nothing rash—promise me, or—or I must stay.”

Even then her unwonted rebellion surprised him. He almost smiled.

“Go on,”—he fixed his eyes firmly on her—
“do what I tell you at once.”

She went on at first mechanically, and then the thought flashed upon her, that by going on rapidly she might get help for Oliver. So she went on steadily, quickening her pace, but not once looking back.

Oliver walked on very slowly a few paces, then, when Martha’s figure had become indistinct in the gloom of the street, he turned round and looked at the men behind him. There were more than twenty now, for several of the other knots had joined, and followed in a row that stretched across the street.

No one spoke, but there was a lowering look of ill-will on every one of the unshaven, grimy faces.

Oliver hesitated, and then he remembered Mr. Fildon’s advice: to give the men time to come round. If he spoke now, perhaps it would provoke an outbreak.

It seemed altogether unreal, like something

he had read of; and yet how plain it all was! —the long street, with ugly houses on each side, stretching away into a road, with nothing higher than a hedge or a wall to intercept the fast-waning light; the heavy atmosphere, still charged with smoke, and across the street filled with shabby houses—for though so near the angle leading into the High Street, this was the poorest quarter of Awlford—were those pale, determined men, with their dirty, patched, and ragged clothes and sullen faces.

He turned round again; he seemed still to see the group behind him, though in front the way was clear, and then there rose up a howl of scorn. No words were spoken; he had no need to suppose himself the object of this outcry, but it tried his self-control beyond endurance. He walked on a few paces, clenching his hands tightly, longing for a more decided provocation, that he might turn round, and without any foolhardiness plead his own cause to those mistaken men. All at once a voice called out—

“Will yer take warnin’ or punishment?—yu’ve had t’ choice set afore yu.”

At this Oliver turned. The men had stood still, and were gathered in a close group, speaking eagerly.

"I want to speak to you about that, my men," Oliver said, in a loud, clear voice.

"Yu're not called on to speak,"—said a small dark-eyed man, with a nose like an eagle, and a head much too big for his shrunken body, who had pushed forward in front of the rest—"yu've got to say yes or no. Will yu give up this cursed invention for takin' away our daily bread, or du you stick by it—yes or no?"

All eyes were bent on Oliver; a few had an earnest, beseeching gaze, but most of them were full of menace.

"I don't acknowledge your right to put the question in this way till you've given me a hearing," he said, firmly. "I am willing and anxious to put the matter before you, and explain it. If I had been here on Tuesday——"

There was a shout that deafened him; he spoke, but he could not hear his own words distinctly; they sounded like the skeletons of words; then he felt a sharp pain in his fore-

head—a flash like lightning seemed to strike his eyes ; he grasped at the air for support with open hands, and he seemed to fall into darkness and sleep.

CHAPTER XX.

NEWS AT THE ELMS.

MRS. VENABLES sat behind her silver urn, looking very dainty and delicate; her dark eyes told well against the fine lace of her cap, and the exquisite pattern of this showed on her still dark hair, with its only occasional silver threads. The breakfast-table at The Elms seemed always in harmony with its mistress—it was so refined and so sparkling.

Some people said that Mrs. Venables was too proud of her old silver, and that crystal butter-dishes and marmalade and cream-pots and sugar-basins would have looked simpler than the brilliant old silver she used every day. There was a quaint egg-stand, too, on a salver as old as Queen Anne's time, and the spoons on this

would have made a collector covetous ; but there was no thought of display in the gentle hostess, so like a bit of old porcelain herself, as she sat behind her tea-urn, and handled the white cups of thin Limoges, in which she dispensed her tea and coffee. She said it kept the butler's hand in to clean the plate, and she also maintained that the simplest food was more palatable when served with dainty surroundings.

Winter as well as summer there were always flowers on Mrs. Venables' breakfast-table ; her household creed was that part of a wife's duty was to make home as lovely as possible for a husband. She had no notion, she said, of a decorated dinner-table for visitors, and nothing done specially for the master of the household.

She was talking to her nieces about fixing an evening to invite Lady Mary Penruddock and her son. Mr. Venables gave a sudden exclamation, and laid down the letter he was reading.

"Good heavens !" and then he stared hard at Gyneth. She and her aunt sat looking at him in breathless expectation, but Louisa's practical

wits kept emotion down, and her colder temperament left curiosity free.

“What is the matter, uncle?” she said—“is anyone ill? Who is the letter from?”

Mr. Venables looked agitated as well as surprised.

“It’s a very bad business indeed, my dear,” he said, gravely; “I knew there was something wrong at Awlford, but I said nothing about it—I hoped things would right themselves, and now there’s been an outbreak, and I am afraid Burridge has been seriously hurt.”

He spoke to Louisa, but his eyes strayed on from her face to Gyneth’s; she had turned pale while he spoke, and her eyes looked larger than usual with the horror that filled them.

“Is his sister with him?” she said, quickly, and then her aunt and Louisa broke into questions too.

“Who is the letter from?” Mrs. Venables asked.

Her husband waved his hand impatiently.

“If you’ll listen,” he said, “I’ll tell you. This letter is from Penruddock. It seems the day

after poor BurrIDGE went down, some of these fellows set upon him in the street, he got a blow on the head and was left for dead ; but, however, it is concussion of the brain, and he is as ill as he well can be ; his sister, by-the-by—you know her, don't you, Kitty?—well, she seems to have behaved like a heroine ; she summoned assistance at once, and then wrote off for Penruddock, and he says she has never left her brother to take so much as an hour's sleep since he was carried senseless into the inn. Oliver's a lucky fellow to have such a friend and such a sister, for I fancy, from Penruddock's letter, that he shares the nursing with Miss BurrIDGE."

Louisa's eyes travelled from her uncle's face to the folded newspaper beside him.

"It will be in the paper," she said. "Shall I look, uncle?"

He handed her the paper, and she soon found a few lines ; they merely told of a disturbance at Awlford, in consequence of some new machinery.

"Some workmen set upon Mr. BurrIDGE, the inventor ; he was left in the street for dead ;

two men, who were found in the act of raising his senseless body, were at first taken up on suspicion of being the perpetrators of the outrage, but on consideration were admitted to bail as they are both known to bear remarkably good characters, and to have been on friendly terms with the injured man. No steps can be taken to discover the perpetrators of the outrage until Mr. BurrIDGE is restored to consciousness."

No one spoke after this, but each of the others looked stealthily at Gyneth.

Mr. Venables felt doubly sad; there was no knowing how this injury might affect Oliver, and he believed that an attachment existed between him and his niece. Mrs. Venables had been so puzzled lately by Gyneth's manner that she had given up speaking of Oliver; she feared that he was dear to this girl whom she loved like a child, and yet, if her niece married Mr. BurrIDGE, Mrs. Venables knew that they could never again be the same to one another.

Louisa did not look at the matter in the same way; here was an excellent marriage for Kitty,

and Kitty was bound to make it, without any nonsense. This accident was about the most unfortunate thing that could have happened.

“Do people go mad if they have concussion of the brain?” she said, eagerly, after a pause of some minutes.

“No,” her uncle spoke, in rather a shocked tone. “Poor fellow! it’s doubly hard coming on the top of his success; I was expecting a letter to tell me that the articles of partnership were signed, and that he was on the way to become one of the richest manufacturers in Yorkshire—poor chap!”

“It is so sad for Miss Burr ridge,” Gyneth said, with an effort, as if tearing herself from some absorbing thought.

“Yes.” Mrs. Venables’ eyes were liquid as she pictured the poor shy woman—for Gyneth had explained Martha’s refusal to visit them—nursing her brother in a strange inn, with no older woman beside her to help or advise. “I suppose one can do nothing to help her; it does seem so very sad!”

“You can write to the poor girl and express

sympathy,"—her uncle looked at Gyneth; "it seems the natural thing to do. I am going to write to Penruddock, and ask if they want further medical advice. I don't know who there may be up there, but it seems to me that Penruddock and I are about the only two men whose opinions the poor fellow cares for when he is in London. Ah! Burridge is a wonderful young fellow. If his life is spared, he'll make a name in the world."

He did not look at his wife as he said this; perhaps one cause of Mrs. Venables' dislike to Mr. Burridge, besides her outward shrinking from his want of refinement, lay in the consciousness felt, though not confessed, that he was a subject on which she and her husband could not agree. It was extremely painful to the loving wife to realise this want of refinement in her husband's taste. No doubt Mr. Burridge was very clever; but then he was quite unlike anyone she had ever been called on to associate with. She could not understand how Charles could have brought himself to wish this man to marry Gyneth. She

was far too much in sympathy with her husband not to feel with him now, and to know why he did not look at her. At this moment he must be resenting, as he had never done before, her dislike to his suffering friend.

“Poor man,”—Louisa, spite of her practical ways, was apt to shed tears with little effort, and her blue eyes were swimming, “even if he recovers, it will be such a sad hindrance, it will throw him back in all his plans.”

Gyneth sat so silent that the others looked at her with increased consideration; and yet, if they could have seen into her thoughts, they would have been surprised. She was deeply grieved for Oliver—more grieved than she cared to show, lest her uncle should misunderstand her. She remembered her coldness towards Mr. Burridge on more than one occasion lately, and now perhaps she never could show him she was sorry. A keen pang shot through her, and she sighed, and her compassionate companions noted this sigh, and drew their own conclusions; but Gyneth’s thoughts were no longer with Mr. Burridge, they had travelled on to

Martha. How great must be her anguish! and yet how soothing in the midst of all to have the daily companionship of Mr. Penruddock.

Gyneth felt sure that Martha loved her brother's friend, and she wondered if this love was returned. She thought Mr. Penruddock would scarcely have been so warm in the praise of a woman he loved, and yet—how could she tell? people had such different ways of showing feeling. She had called again at the cottage, and learned that Miss Burridge had gone to the North with her brother, perhaps for three weeks. This had disappointed Gyneth. She felt as if she had found in Martha Burridge the friend she had long been in search of, and, with the warm enthusiasm which so often underlies a timid nature, she had gone on creating a character which she imagined to be Martha's, out of the little which she had revealed of herself. Gyneth thought her interest in Martha lay partly in the fact of her reserve; she was so difficult to understand that it must be delightful to watch the gradual unfolding of such a nature. If Mr. Penruddock did not already

love Miss Burridge, he soon would, thrown together as they now were, each entirely dependent on the other for sympathy; for her constant anxiety must of necessity draw Martha's feelings nearer the surface, and make her unable to maintain that constant guard over herself which, in a way, seemed to repel affection.

As Gyneth sat thinking, she almost forgot Oliver's state; she only felt an ardent longing to be at Awlford, to hear what those two were saying to one another.

"No," she said to herself, "I do not think Martha Burridge is to be pitied so very much as uncle thinks she is. Of course she feels very sad for her brother; but then she has such great compensation."

Looking up, she saw that she was left alone. Mrs. Venables had gone away on purpose to avoid one of the great pleasures of her life, a talk with her favourite niece.

"I will go and write my letter to Martha Burridge," the girl thought; "Uncle Charles said it would be kind to write to her."

CHAPTER XXI.

TWO NURSES.

FOR six days and nights Martha had kept her post by her brother's bed; she would scarcely leave him to take necessary food, but she was resolute against taking rest. She had telegraphed the news to Maurice, more from a feeling that she could not take the entire responsibility than because she hoped for his presence; and Maurice went down at once to Awlford, and, when he found how critical his friend's state was, told Martha he should not leave her till Oliver was out of danger. He wished her to have a trained nurse, but the diffidence of her own powers, which so marred her life, did not trouble Martha

now. She had nursed her mother for years before she died; she considered any woman culpable of gross neglect who yielded so precious a charge, and the doctor told Maurice he was quite satisfied his patient could not be in better hands. Usually, Oliver's state was that of unconscious stupor, but there were times when he raved, and when Martha was glad of Maurice's help to keep him quiet.

On this sixth day, when Maurice came into the sick-room, Martha sat by the bedside with closed eyelids. He stepped very gently, for he hoped she slept; but when he came close to the other side of the sick man he looked across at her before he looked at Oliver. She was deathly white, and the rings below her eyes, which had been purple, were now a dull brown; her lips were blue and parched, and her nose had a pinched and suffering look that told its own story. He looked away from the marble-like face and bent over her patient. It seemed to him that Oliver was better; his breathing was easier, and there was a relaxed look in the mouth that Maurice fancied was hopeful. Still it was

terribly sad to see this man, so short a while ago the very personification of healthy life and mental energy, prostrate and disfigured, the upper part of his face hidden by the bandages which wrapped his head, for the blow which had stunned him so suddenly had inflicted a severe scalp wound, and his fits of delirium made it necessary to give to this more protection than the wound itself would have required.

Oliver, perhaps, knew something of the strength of his friend's affection for him, but until Maurice saw him lying wounded and helpless, he did not know how warmly he loved Oliver. In all those years when he had only had a far-off mother to worship, the love that should have been poured out on brothers and sisters had gone out to the friends of his childhood, and, though for some years he and Oliver had been strangers, Maurice had cherished both a fond and a proud memory of the gifted little fellow who was believed by his sister to be a genius. When they met once or twice in the interval he had thought Oliver cold and changed ; lately when the friendship had been re-

newed, there were still constant points of difference between them, and Maurice would sit patiently while his friend harangued, not agreeing, perhaps, with a word Oliver uttered, only thinking what a clever fellow he was, and what a great man he would be one day, from this very strength of will and intellect. When he saw him on his first arrival lying with widely open, unconscious eyes, Maurice felt like a murderer; all the harsh thoughts that had risen against his friend's happiness, all the doubts of Oliver's power to win Gyneth Ralston's love, repeated themselves, stabbing him like some sharp weapon. Oh, how false, how unloving, he had been! What was anything in the world now beside the dread he felt that Oliver was lost to him? And in that dread, when he found that Martha would not allow him to be always beside her brother, he had not spared her. What was the strength or health of either of them worth compared with Oliver? and the doctor said that only watchful care would bring him through.

Now, as he noted this change in the patient, Maurice's heart went out in thankfulness; he

drew a deep breath, and looked again at Martha. How heavily she must be sleeping, and yet she did not seem to breathe. All at once he roused himself to feel that something was wrong; he had never seen anyone look so death-like as Martha looked now. He went quietly round the bed and touched her arm. She did not move; he felt her hand; it was quite cold, and yet the room was warmer than the doctor had ordered. Maurice was frightened; he tried to rouse her by shaking her arm; but she did not move, and, when he let her go, the arm dropped on her lap again like that of a puppet.

"Martha," he said. There was a slight movement of the eyelids, an effort to sigh which stopped half-way, as if the fatigue of rousing were too great, and she longed to be again unconscious.

Maurice looked round the room, and then he filled his hand with cold water and sprinkled it on her face. She gave a long, shivering sigh, and again he tried the cold water, this time more suddenly and plentifully. Martha started, shook herself, and opened her eyes widely. She

looked at Maurice, she put her hands slowly to her wet hair and the front of her gown; then she glanced rapidly at Oliver. A startled look came into her face, and she smiled feebly.

"I must have fallen asleep," she said; "thank you for wakening me."

She rose up, then she stumbled, and turned to a ghastly whiteness; Maurice was too far off to save her, and she reeled up against the wall behind her.

"What is it, dear Martha?" he said, tenderly. "Sit down."

He placed her gently in a chair and gave her some water to drink, and she lay back for some minutes very pale and exhausted.

"I am more faint than sleepy, I think," she said, after a pause; "it seemed as if my heart had left off beating; but that was a fancy, of course."

He was looking very grave and anxious as his eyes met hers. Martha saw it, and she smiled at him gratefully.

"Thank you so very much," she said. "I

am sorry to be so stupid ; you have quite enough to do with Oliver, don't trouble about me."

She looked at her brother ; his eyes were open, and a faint smile of recognition was on his face. Martha pointed to the door with a quick, nervous gesture ; she thought the sight of Maurice might agitate her patient ; but Maurice took her hand firmly, and had led her out of the room before she could collect herself to offer resistance. He took her to the door of her own room, and then he told her she must consult the doctor about herself.

"You have overtaxed your strength," he said, cheerfully. "I shall sit up with Oliver to-night instead of you, I must indeed."

When he went back he saw plainly that the crisis was past, and that consciousness had come back to his friend. Maurice had never nursed anyone till now, but his natural gentleness, and the tenderness which lay under his quiet manner, helped him. Oliver tried to speak, but was too feeble to require much checking, and, when he found Maurice resolved against conversation, he soon dozed off again after the fashion

of invalids. It was curious to see how the physical injury had taken away his strength of will.

When the doctor came, he decided that for a week at least Mr. Penruddock should watch over his friend at night while Miss Burridge slept.

“There’s no use in any other plan,” the doctor said, in impatient answer to Martha’s pleading eyes. “If I had known you would have broken down in this sudden way, I should have insisted on a trained nurse. However, with your brother’s constitution, he’ll be well in no time, and so perhaps we can manage with Mr. Penruddock’s kind help ; but don’t you go burning the candle at both ends, if you please, Miss Burridge ; if you do, I shall take upon myself to send in a nurse.”

He felt anxious about this new patient, and provoked with himself that he had so miscalculated her strength, but she did not interest him as a more lively or a more stylish woman would have done. She was so shy that, though he thought her very handsome, he took little inter-

est in studying her, only it would not do to have her fainting away by his patient's bedside. He liked the change of plan for the night. Mr. Penruddock's talk amused and pleased him, it was rare to get hold of a polished Londoner in this busy, smoky Awlford, and it was pleasant to get a good gossip when he came round for his morning visit and took the night's report from Maurice.

But Martha rebelled against the new plan. It took her away from Oliver, and it also separated her from Maurice. She used to linger as long as she dared before she went to her room at night, and when she reached it, instead of at once seeking the rest she so much needed, she sat repeating to herself every kind word, every affectionate glance which she had had from Maurice that day; for, though he lay down in the afternoon, he was in and out of the sick-room all the morning, and, now that Oliver was so much better during the last few days, Maurice and Martha dined together in a little sitting-room adjoining the sick-chamber.

What feasts those meals were to Martha!

She could not tell how it was, she so gave herself up to them that she did not realize any change in herself; but she knew that to sit near Maurice, to listen to his voice, to gaze at him when he did not know it, had become her life—and life was very happy now. The only shadows in it were these nightly partings. No, she could not go to bed and waste such blissful moments in sleep; she would sit and think of Maurice.

For the time her conscience lay still. She could not reproach herself with any outward neglect of Oliver. Her whole day of active service was devoted to him, and he was not a patient invalid. He was so restless, and so anxious to get well, that he retarded his own recovery.

So the days went by, and the nights, during which Maurice was learning to be a watchful and tender nurse. Oliver said he raised his head and turned his pillow better than Martha did, and he got him to take broth and other spoon dainties far more easily. He only wished he could have Maurice in the day now that he could talk again. In the night he slept a good deal, or else was drowsy; it would be better, he

thought, to let Martha watch through the night. But the doctor only laughed, and shook his head, and told him he got quite as much talk as was good for him.

CHAPTER XXII.

A TIFF.

LADY MARY PENRUDDOCK felt very disquieted. When Maurice took his sudden journey to Awlford, she was visiting some friends a few miles from London, so that she did not know of her son's departure till she heard that he was with his sick friend, and that he intended to remain with him till danger was over. Lady Mary was much annoyed. It was so quixotic, so entirely unnecessary, to say nothing of the strangeness of so young a woman as Miss Burridge consenting to share her duties with Maurice.

“Of course her position makes it safer; but I really don't know, Maurice is so eccentric, so utterly without worldly wisdom, that he is as

likely as not to marry beneath him. The greatest safeguard is perhaps their intimacy as children. But such a position is really most unwise ; if they are always together, it must be very hard for the girl, even if it does not affect Maurice. How can he be so foolish !” She said this impatiently, with a vivid flash in her long, velvet-like eyes. Then she went on thinking.

“Men must be much fonder of their friends than women are. To begin with, I could never have chosen a friend so out of my own circle as this young woman is, so that I could not have been called on to play the part of nurse. What can Maurice see in that rough, abrupt man ? He is good-looking, and clever, and there he ends. Well, if he is going to be famous, and rise in the world, I don’t blame Maurice. Manner does not signify so much if a man has the rest of this world’s goods ; though Mr. BurrIDGE is a man that no amount of society will soften ; he’s so hard, he’ll rub off everyone else’s angles, but go through all untouched. I took his measure at once.” And then, as she went on thinking of Oliver, it occurred suddenly

to Lady Mary that the family at The Elms would know more about his illness than she did.

Maurice had written to her twice; but very vaguely. And to her last letter, begging him to return at once, he had sent no answer at all.

For a time the fear that he had lost his heart to Miss Ralston had lulled the suspicion she had once felt about Martha Burrridge; but of late Maurice had been silent about the family at The Elms, and had she not herself witnessed Oliver Burrridge's evident love for Miss Ralston?

"Nonsense," she said, and she gracefully rolled herself off the sofa, on which much of her day was passed, "that girl may be eccentric and dreamy, but she must be a fool if she hesitates between Maurice and this Oliver Burrridge. Till I die Maurice will only be able just to keep a wife; as to his giving her all that Miss Ralston has been used to, it is simply impossible."

While she was driving to The Elms—for, though she was languid and indolent, Lady Mary never waited long between a purpose and its execution—she thought about Maurice's

future. Unless he made a good marriage, she really saw no other prospect before him than that of remaining single. Now that she had learned by personal association how very eccentric her son's ideas were, she saw what a good thing it was that his father had willed all his property to her, thus leaving his son entirely dependent on his own resources.

People had written to Lady Mary before she came to England, and had said that this will was unfair. Some friends had even gone so far as to suggest that she should endeavour to remedy it; but she preferred to let things be. She loved Maurice dearly, she told herself, and she liked to surround him with every possible luxury and comfort; if the property had been divided, her income would barely have sufficed for what she needed.

There were a good many things which Lady Mary Penruddock did not tell herself, but which her friends told to one another. She was just one of those women who are never told the truth face to face by their friends; but no one scrupled to say of her that she was self-indul-

gent and extravagant, and that she frequently spent much more than she needed on mere caprices. She thought, on the contrary, that every pound she spent on the decoration of her house, and the gratification of her taste for luxury and beauty, was spent for Maurice, ignoring the fact that he kept on his bachelor rooms in the Temple, and spent only part of his time with her. She considered that she even dressed to please him; it was necessary, she said, to be always well and fashionably dressed, and to have constant variety—otherwise Maurice, who went out so little, would really not know how ladies ought to dress: besides, he would tire of seeing her in the same gowns. Now, as she drove along the road, she thought over all this, and over the sacrifices she made for her son.

“I might have married”—she gave a little smile,—“of course, I might marry still if I chose, but I would not be so selfish for the world. Dear me, suppose the property had been divided—Maurice would think himself quite justified in marrying then, and perhaps by

this time there would be a family with scarcely enough to buy shoes and stockings."

She shuddered first at the prospect of becoming a grandmother, and then at the idea of her poor, dear Maurice transferred from an elegant, luxurious home to some little house in the suburbs, with a common-place wife and half a dozen noisy children. This last thought had brought her back, as thought is apt to do, to the point from which she started. Was there any danger that Maurice should become attached to this sister of Oliver Burridge? It was just possible that the people at The Elms had seen Miss Burridge, and if she could only hear something about her, Lady Mary trusted to her own wits for drawing a right conclusion.

Mrs. Venables was at home to-day; the two ladies had met when she returned Lady Mary Penruddock's visit, but they had not been attracted to one another. Mrs. Venables secretly thought Maurice's mother frivolous, and quite unworthy of her delightful son, and Lady Mary thought Mrs. Venables stiff and dowdy-looking, though she could not deny that she must have been a very pretty woman.

“She might be extremely remarkable-looking even now, if she dressed up to her looks.”

To-day, however, when Lady Mary came into the drawing-room at The Elms—a room which pleased even her fastidious taste in its combination of refinement and unstudied carelessness in book-covered tables and all the evidences it bore of being occupied by cultivated people—she saw how much more distinguished-looking Mrs. Venables was than she had thought her in her bonnet, and she saw at once the likeness between her aunt and Gyneth Ralston.

It is curious to note when several women get together, how one among them, and often the least gifted of the group, takes the lead of the talk, and drives it along whatever line she chooses; or, as this sort of talk is usually as aimless as it is without point, she follows the bent of her own words here and there, flitting butterfly-like from subject to subject without one effort to gather more than mere pastime from any. To-day Lady Mary led the conversation, but she did not flutter hither and thither, she kept her aim steadily in view, and paid no at-

tention to the efforts made by Gyneth to turn to another subject when the visitor began to speak of Mr. Burr ridge.

“You know Miss Burr ridge, I think?”

Gyneth resented the intense inquiry of those long, dark eyes; there was a compelling fascination in them as if they would make her speak against her will.

“Yes, I have seen her.”

She did not feel inclined to gratify Lady Mary’s curiosity; her repulsion from this languid, fascinating woman increased each time she saw her.

But Louisa answered without being asked.

“Yes,” she said, smiling, and Lady Mary smiled back again, charmed by her bright freshness, “we call Miss Burr ridge ‘Kitty’s mysterious friend.’ She lives near here in a cottage with a rose-covered porch and two canaries. I saw this through the open door, Kitty, the other day; but Miss Burr ridge only admits my sister, and she refuses to come here, and I am dying to see her.”

“Probably she is not worth seeing, quite

common-place; when people shut themselves up, there is usually some very good reason for doing so." Lady Mary spoke languidly, but she kept a watch on Gyneth's face. She saw a flush rise on the girl's cheeks.

"Miss Burridge is very handsome," Gyneth said, gravely. "I think she is more remarkable-looking than anyone I ever saw."

She did not look at Lady Mary, so she missed the flash that made her eyes grow in an instant bright and keen.

"Remarkable-looking, is she!—oh, yes." She looked attentively at Gyneth. "I remember my son said so too; well, her brother is handsome, is he not?"

"I think so," Louisa said. She meant to come to her sister's relief, but Gyneth had her answer ready, and it would be spoken. "Yes," she said, slowly, "Mr. Penruddock admires her very much, and he of course knows her very well. I think he is often at the cottage."

Lady Mary's anger nearly suffocated her. Weeks ago she had feared this, had even thought it over, and then had gone away on a

visit, and had forgotten all about it in the pursuit of an exquisite china bowl for which she was still in treaty, and then the news from Awlford brought back to her memory the fact of Martha's intimacy with her son; she felt that she had been quietly duped by her gentle Maurice, and her temper was ruffled.

She looked up, and met an earnest gaze in Gyneth's eyes.

"Yes," she said, with an effort at composure, "I believe my son is very kind to the Burridges, he takes a good deal of notice of them."

Mrs. Venables smiled, this speech amused her. She felt that something had vexed the visitor, but not having *le mot de l'énigme* she could not guess rightly at it. Still it was absurd to think that such a man as Oliver Burridge could care for notice from anyone.

"Your son is a great friend of Mr. Burridge's, I think," she said, gently; "he has written several times to Mr. Venables to tell us of his poor friend's state, it seems to have been a terrible affair. I wonder he was not killed."

"Yes,"—Lady Mary spoke with unusual

abruptness—"I really hope he will get well soon; my son is much wanted at home, and he says he cannot leave Awlford till Mr. BurrIDGE is quite out of danger."

She looked inquiringly from Mrs. Venables to Gyneth. The girl was silent, it was impossible to guess at her feelings, and yet Lady Mary thought she did not look quite as she would have looked if she loved the man they were discussing.

"Your son's letter this morning gives a much better account," said Mrs. Venables; "he says danger is over, and he hopes his friend will soon be all right again, but he does not give a good report of Miss BurrIDGE."

Lady Mary felt furious, but she managed to keep outward calm of manner.

"They should have had a proper nurse from the beginning," she said. "I have no pity for quixotic people, who bring illness on themselves, I think them far more culpable than praise-worthy."

"That is exactly what I think;" Louisa was eager to acquiesce with her idol, for just now

she adored Lady Mary with that passionate short-lived ardour which a young girl is apt to feel for a woman some years older than herself, who possesses the qualities she most longs to possess, and who, if she wishes to retain her worshipper, must remember that she is an idol and remain on her pedestal.

Lady Mary quite understood this power. She gave Louisa a smile which the young girl treasured as a special favour shown to her, but she went on talking to Mrs. Venables.

"It seems to me," she said, "that this young woman has immense confidence in herself. I would not have undertaken such a responsibility had Maurice been ill on any consideration."

"I think it would have been better to have a professional nurse," said Mrs. Venables, "but still nursing is a special gift, and Miss BurrIDGE seems to be so diffident of her powers in other ways that I fancy she would scarcely have undertaken this if she had not felt sure of herself."

"But"—Louisa looked very bright and

eager—"she has broken down, auntie, so you see she was not fit to be trusted."

Lady Mary smiled.

"I am afraid this is generally the case," she said; "the voluntary element always fails—it is so much better to pay people for doing things, they are sure then to be properly done; but I really am glad to hear Mr. BurrIDGE is better, and I hope he will not get into another street-fight."

Gyneth swelled with indignation.

"I beg your pardon," she said; "but this was not a street-fight. There was a strike among the work-people because of an improvement in machinery, invented by Mr. BurrIDGE, and, when the men saw him, they attacked him without provocation."

Louisa wondered how her sister could speak so reprovngly to Lady Mary, while Mrs. Venables looked at her eldest niece with eyes full of sympathy.

But Lady Mary smiled in a benignant, all embracing manner. She had discovered what she wanted, and could forgive any amount of offence

taken ; it was plain that this girl did love Mr. Burridge, and, spite of her fears about Martha, a liking for Miss Ralston would be far the most dangerous attachment for Maurice ; the other could never be more than a temporary infatuation, to be cured by separation—Maurice could never dream of marrying Martha Burridge ; so she smiled graciously at Gyneth.

“Really, it is quite monstrous to hear of these things ; the arrogance of the working class will soon bring us all to one level, if it is allowed to go on unchecked. Society will be a sort of Babel. How very anxious you must have been through it all.”

She rose to go, giving Gyneth a smile of sweet sympathy, which had a quite contrary effect to that which its giver intended.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TO THE RESCUE.

“ON the whole,” Mr. Fildon said, as he rose from sitting beside Oliver, “I am quite sure this illness has advanced your scheme, instead of retarding it. It seems that no one believed the blow was so severe, and now that the rumour has spread that you do not mean to prosecute, the better-disposed among the men will come round. I shall not be surprised if you are a popular hero by the time you are able to walk about.”

Oliver smiled.

“Hardly that,”—his voice was still weak, though he spoke without hesitation,—“but it will be a great matter for our invention. I have always fancied that, if they could only know that I have been thinking this idea out ever since I

first came up here, when I was a boy, they might have a little patience ;—well, I must not keep you ; it's good of you to come and see me, Fildon." And he grasped his friend's hand with almost as much power as ever.

Mr. Fildon stopped when he reached the door.

"I suppose Mr. Penruddock will be leaving you soon," he said ; "if not, I wish he could come up and dine with us one evening."

"Thank you, I'll tell him. No, he says he shall stay on till he's seen me out-of-doors once more ; he's a first-rate friend."

"He's a capital fellow," and Mr. Fildon nodded and went away.

He might just as well have gone on to the little sitting-room, and have spoken to Maurice, but he felt shy and awkward.

Gossip, that favourite country pastime, even in so busy a town as Awlford, had diligently commented on and watched over the association of "the gentleman from London" and so "fine-grown a young woman" as Martha. They never walked out together, but that of course

was only because they did not choose both to leave their patient at the same time ; they were no doubt engaged lovers, indeed the mistress of the post-office, who had a reputation for knowing the private affairs of most Awlford families, asserted in half whispers that Mr. Penruddock was married to Miss Burridge, but that the marriage was kept secret, as the gentleman did not wish his family to know of it at present.

Mrs. Fildon had informed her husband how matters stood, and had entreated him if possible to see this pair together, so that he might be able to judge whether they were married or only engaged ; she even went so far as to indicate various signs and tokens by which her unobservant spouse might determine the question which so exercised the female minds of Awlford. For in this smoky manufacturing town the “gentlemen,” as the richer part of the male community were designated, were in general much too busy to discuss their neighbours’ affairs after the fashion of mere country squires who have nothing else to talk of, unless it be farming and

politics. These busy manufacturers knew nothing of the enjoyment of tearing a woman's character to pieces, and of building upon a fragment of indiscreet folly—who shall say how bitterly repented of!—a story scandalous enough to frighten good women away from association with its heroine.

The manufacturers of Awlford had no leisure in which to become that most dignified of characters, a scavenger of society—or more truly, for this is simply the title under which he screens his love of slander, the purveyor of tittle-tattle in the country homes of the neighbourhood. The men of Awlford could never lie down to rest with the comfortable conviction that they had that day so used their tongues as to deprive a woman of the protection and support of some influential neighbours; for, though the neighbours may remonstrate and refuse to listen, they are only human—they live infested by the gossiping tribe who create, as they pass it on from mouth to mouth, a slander from a surmise. The influential neighbours begin by admitting that “there is usually

something in an *on dit*," and so by degrees the victim is given up and allowed to drift away, when a little firmness, a little more courage, above all a determined silencing of this foul appetite for hearing a bit of scandal about one's neighbour, would have swept society of the trash for ever, and have perhaps taught the jackdaws a useful lesson.

But Mrs. Fildon had less to do than many country ladies have, and gossip was to her the one excitement of life. Her husband nodded at her when she made this request, but he forgot all about it till Oliver began to praise his friend. Then Mr. Fildon shrank from the encounter; he had already made Maurice's acquaintance, and he did not see how he could intrude on these two young people, doubtless wholly taken up with one another, for they were at dinner when Mr. Fildon arrived, and he had begged that they might not be disturbed, so he thought he would leave a message for Maurice to come and see his wife, and let her judge for herself.

If he had gone into their room, he would not have been able to solve Mrs. Fildon's doubts.

Dinner was over, and Martha had risen from the uncleared table, and was looking out of window, while Maurice sat still reading a newspaper. They were both musing on the same point, however; presently Maurice said,

“I suppose the doctor will let him go out soon now.”

Martha started out of her reverie and turned round.

“I believe he fears the shaking of a carriage for Oliver; he does not wish him to walk just yet, but he said yesterday, if it were not for the stones here, he might take a little drive.”

“Ah!” Maurice said.

Martha looked at him attentively; she had got his face so by heart that she understood the little changes and clouds that passed over it far better than she had understood them in London; was he impatient for Oliver’s recovery because he wished to leave them? she wondered.

In an instant she went back into herself; when she spoke again Maurice looked up suddenly, startled by the change in her voice.

“Why need you stay?” she said, coldly, “he is really well now, and I am quite able to care for him.”

Maurice smiled at her.

“You are not the best judge of that; besides, I flatter myself that I am of use to Oliver; I think he would miss me.” Martha had flushed scarlet; she had been living in a dream, and this sudden awakening made her terribly angry with herself—so angry that she scarcely knew what she said.

“You shall not stay a day longer,” she said, passionately; “we are not so selfish as all that; no doubt Oliver will miss you and your kindness, but do you think he has never missed anyone before in his life; he’s a man, not a baby, he knows everything can’t be sacrificed to him.”

While she spoke, her bosom heaved, and her eyes dilated; she looked vehement; it seemed as if she kept her arms straight beside her lest they should help her words with gesture, but her hands trembled spite of all her efforts.

Maurice was completely puzzled; he had no key to this sudden show of feeling; it was

impossible for him to believe that Martha wished to send him away, he preferred to think that she had been vexed by something he knew nothing about.

“You are looking at it the wrong way,” he said, simply. “I can easily stay another week ; if I really am of use to Oliver, and I believe I am, there is no need why he should do without me ; and, Martha,” he said, in a tone of gentle reproof, “you know well enough I like being here, don’t you?”

He looked at her with a fond elder brother’s smile. She hung her head, her cheeks still rosy from her late vehemence.

“I am so glad,” she murmured softly to herself, rather than to Maurice, but her face was full of sweet hope. She had forgotten her harshness.

There was a knock at the door. Then the waiter flung it open and announced, “Lady Mary Penruddock.”

She came in smiling, the personification of graceful ease, and going up to Maurice she kissed him, before he could recover from the shock of her arrival. Then she turned to Martha,

who, besides her natural alarm, felt ready to fall, conscious of the uncleared table and the littered room.

She looked despairingly at the waiter, and he began, with the usual clatter of his kind, to take away the plates and dishes, a proceeding which added much to the discomfort and temporary squalor of the surroundings. But the crash of a falling plate and the general clatter were lost on Martha; she stood spell-bound when Lady Mary turned from her son and saying, "This is Miss Burrridge, I suppose," made her a little graceful curtsey.

Martha's feelings of hospitality conquered her alarm. She timidly held out her hand.

Lady Mary raised her eyebrows, and put two fingers into the girl's cold clasping hand. She looked at her steadily, not keeping her bright keen eyes in one place, but moving them downwards from the now pale anxious face, over the plain gown, and then upwards, with a certain amount of unwilling admiration, to the roughened waves of red hair. Martha's eyes had drooped beneath that keen gaze, but she felt

its progress, and her pale face grew flushed and nervous.

"How is your brother, Miss Burr ridge?" Lady Mary said, and seated herself in the chair which Maurice drew forward.

Martha began to answer in her stiff constrained voice. She scarcely knew what she said, the room seemed to be going round, a mist was before her eyes, her head felt hot, and her hands death-like in their coldness. Maurice saw how shy she was, and he interrupted her answer.

"Going on famously," he said; "we hope to have him out before a week is over, his constitution has done wonders for him."

"Yes," Lady Mary smiled, but she spoke absently, and then she turned completely away from Martha. "I want to talk to you, Maurice," she said.

Martha moved to the door.

"Pray don't let me send you away," the visitor said, languidly.

"Thank you; it's time I went to my brother."

Martha went out and closed the door behind her ; then Lady Mary looked at her son.

“What a fine grown young woman she is ; but not at all like her brother.”

“No,” he answered ; “she is not like her brother.” He felt uneasy and ruffled, he did not approve of his mother’s sudden arrival. “Why did you not write and say you were coming, mother.”

His grave manner did not alarm her, she had known beforehand he would dislike her interference.

“Well, dear,” she smiled, exquisitely, a smile that wreathed itself over her whole face, and made Maurice, spite of his annoyance, think how lovely she must have been in those years when he had only dreamed of his far-off mother. “I have been asked so many times to go and see my cousin Rachel, and her place is only an hour or so farther than this by railway, so I thought I would come and see if you would not go with me. You are a naughty fellow, you know,”—she was still smiling, but there was a very keen inquiry in her eyes. “You never

have time to go anywhere with me, and yet you have been weeks helping that young woman to nurse her brother."

Something in her tone as she spoke of Martha annoyed him.

"They are the dearest friends I have," he said. "I will join you at Mrs. Maynard's next week if you like; but I have promised Oliver to take him out for the first time. I believe I am really necessary to him in many ways."

"Very likely, as there seems to be no nurse—at least Mrs. Venables told me there was none; but, Maurice, my dear boy, I do wonder a little at you; it is not likely that young woman can understand the fitness of things as well as you do; you should have insisted on having a proper nurse."

"Oh, we have not wanted one," he said, in a masterful voice which startled his mother, and made her angry too, she had never heard it before, except from his father on rare occasions. At that moment Maurice put her in mind of Colonel Penruddock, and she rose into the rebellion women more frequently show against

their husband's rule than against that of their sons.

"You may not have wanted her," she said, imperiously ; "but, I assure you, you have been doing a most extraordinary thing—a thing that is not done. I saw that Mrs. Venables quite took my view, although, of course, before her nieces we could not discuss it."

Maurice longed to ask some questions, but he could not trust himself just then to speak of Gyneth, he was too angry with his mother already to run the risk of farther provocation. He had thought her so different from this, he fancied she would have taken a so much larger view of things.

"I agree with you in principle," he said, "but this is quite a case beyond any mere narrow rules. I owe Martha and Oliver more than I can ever repay them, and, besides that, I am the only intimate friend he has, or whom he could bear to have about him. They are the only brother and sister I have ever known, remember."

The word sister quieted Lady Mary, and,

besides, she was glad to give up a reproving tone, for coming down in the train she had told herself that the surest way of increasing a misplaced attachment is to find fault with the object of it, and she had actually been so unwise as to blame Martha Burridge. She patted Maurice's shoulder with her soft, cream-coloured fingers.

“Well—well, you are such a dear grateful fellow,” she said. “It will be all right now I am here. And now I will get you to order me a room, and then I will go on to Rachel Maynard to-morrow, or next day.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

FASCINATION.

MARTHA sat at the table, her face hidden by her clasped hands. She was very happy, and yet very miserable, this morning. Lady Mary had breakfasted in her room; but Martha was dreading the moment when the visitor would come down to luncheon, and yet the change in Maurice's manner towards her filled her heart with gladness, and something differing from mere gladness. A softness—a gentle happiness stole over her; she felt less stiff, and her face looked beautiful as she unclasped her hands and rose, thinking she heard her visitor's approach. It was, however, only the waiter. Maurice had taken her place be-

side Oliver, to give her time to see all was right. He said this smiling, as if he felt full confidence in her powers ; but she had so longed to ask his advice, or, at least, that he would give a look to see that all was what his mother was used to. But she could not bring herself to do this, just now she shrank more than ever from confessing any social deficiency to Maurice. It seemed as if his mother's arrival, instead of alienating him, had made him far more to Martha than he had ever been—so attentive to her slightest wish, and this with a kind of sheltering tenderness, as if he wanted her to appear at her best before Lady Mary. Martha's heart throbbed with a new feeling ; it was the first time that hope had come into her silent love, and there was a depth of sweetness in her eyes this morning that made them most beautiful—they were full of faith and hope and love. At last the unbelieving heart was at rest.

She had not been much with Maurice, except at meal-times, and yet his influence encompassed her, as it were. Even when he left the room, his presence seemed to linger

in it; and then she could always count the half-hours till he came again.

She had sometimes told herself, when this absorption grew visible to her, that she was hopeless of any return of love, that she only worshipped him afar off as a superior being, that she basked in the cheering his sympathy and his gentle, playful friendship shed into her heart as a flower basks in the sunshine. He was the only faultless being she had ever known, for she could never see the faults in him that Oliver complained of. If Maurice were as fastidious as Oliver said he was, he would not find the pleasure he seemed to find in talking to her; and as to his want of ambition, she argued to herself, that men could not all be made alike, Maurice was still young enough to do great things with his life, and if not—— Were not, perhaps, those women happiest beloved by men who had not so distinguished themselves as to be called on to fill a prominent place in their generation.

She was truly happy this morning, and yet

she grew painfully nervous as she heard a rustling along the passage, and felt sure this was really her visitor.

Yes, it was Lady Mary, wrapped in a long, white loose gown that made her look still taller, Martha thought. She had a paper in one hand, and gathered up the folds of her skirt with the other, so she gave Martha a smiling nod, and placed herself in the only easy-chair in the room.

"I'm sorry you waited for me," she said, with an impatient look at the empty table. "I eat so little that I prefer to eat alone, and not to be a tie on others. I am sure you wish to be with your brother."

Martha rang the bell; then, screwing up her courage, she asked if Lady Mary had slept well.

The visitor started, and raised her head.

"I beg your pardon," she said, keeping her eyes, however, on her paper. But Martha was too much frightened to repeat her question.

The waiter came in, and asked if they were ready for luncheon.

"There is no hurry, I think, till my son comes," Lady Mary said. "Will you ask Mr. Penruddock to come to me?"

It seemed to Martha that Lady Mary was only thinking of herself. She turned to the waiter.

"You can bring Mr. Burrigge's dinner at once," she said.

Lady Mary wondered to herself what companionship Maurice could find in this woman.

"If you will excuse me," Martha said, abruptly, "I will tell Mr. Penruddock you want him."

"Thank you." Then she forced a smile. "I shall be glad to call on your brother, if he will permit it, this afternoon. I suppose you lunch with him; he should never be left alone, I fancy."

Martha felt dumb and powerless; she longed to say that the doctor had ordered Oliver to be kept from too much talking, and that he was for that reason accustomed to be left alone occasionally, but there was in Lady Mary's smile a certainty of being right that baffled Martha, and

made her feel hopelessly wrong. She was really glad to get away; it seemed as if anything she ate would have choked her in that smooth, indifferent presence.

As she sat by Oliver—for Maurice at once obeyed his mother's summons—he asked how she liked playing hostess to a fashionable lady.

“Not at all; but I forgot: Lady Mary wants to come to see you.”

“Does she?” He thought a minute, and then he looked pleased. “Well, she can come,” he said. “I’m getting tired of you two; you always agree with me, and poor Fildon means well, but he’s a stupid fellow.”

Martha looked surprised.

“How brave you are!” she said, admiringly; “now I should so dislike a stranger to come to see me when I was ill.”

Oliver laughed.

“I don’t fancy the being ill would make much difference to you, you shy creature,” he said; “but I expect you are going to give shyness up—eh, Martha? and come out in a new character.”

Martha shook her head. She would not

complain, she did not wish to prejudice her brother against Lady Mary, but she shivered at the thought of another interview with her, and it was possible the visitor might stay on a day or two. Martha had heard something about waiting till Maurice could accompany his mother, and she wondered how she should get through such a prolonged trial.

One often sees in a country lane a small boy on the back of a huge cart-horse, guiding the animal as he wills. The horse could free himself in a moment, and trample his weak and often wilful rider in the dust or mud under his feet; but the boy's fearlessness, his assumption of authority, awe the grand creature he bestrides, and he remains its master. Martha would have laughed if she had been told she was Lady Mary's superior both in beauty and intellect; she felt quite unworthy to speak to her.

Lady Mary came to see Oliver, and sat for half an hour talking to him and giving him her opinions on a variety of subjects, and when she went away she said she had quite enjoyed her chat, and that she should like to pay him

another visit later in the day. Maurice had been present at this interview, but he had taken up a book, and had not joined in the talk. Now left alone, Oliver leaned back and smiled; it was so absurd to think that Martha, with all her bodily and mental gifts, was afraid of this lady.

“She is a thorough lady, though,” he said to himself, “and she’s much easier to get on with than some ladies are. Mrs. Venables, for instance.” He sighed; his favourite maxim had been that if people did not like one it argued some want in them, not in oneself. But, in spite of the coldness he felt in the manner of Gyneth’s aunt towards him, she was so much like her niece that he could not help trying to please her, and he could not help wishing she would treat him differently. He liked Lady Mary, and she evidently liked him, and, as he remembered her disdainful manner towards him at The Elms, he was puzzled by the sudden change. He was puzzled, too, by her visit and the pleasure she expressed in making his acquaintance. What did this change mean? She had not spoken of Martha, but his sister’s manner had told Oliver

that there was no sympathy between her and Lady Mary. "If she likes us," he went on, "it must be for ourselves. We can be of no possible use to her that I can see. If it were gratitude for any kindness we may have shown Maurice years ago, she has had plenty of time to show that sooner."

He thought it over a little longer, and then decided that it was doubtless the interest she felt in him and in his success that had prompted Lady Mary's conduct.

In the evening Maurice went to call on Mr. Fildon, and Martha had brought in some sewing to Oliver's room; but she was scarcely seated when a message came from Lady Mary.

She sent her maid to know if she might come and read to Mr. Burridge. Before Martha could speak, Oliver sent a delighted affirmative, and very soon Lady Mary came in, with a charming show of interest, and she bent over Oliver as if he really were a dear friend.

Martha sat still, her fingers felt too clammy to hold her needle, she knew she was in the

way; and when Oliver turned round and appealed to her as to what she would like to be read, she grumbled out an assent in a voice that sounded strangely unlike her own, and got up to go away.

Oliver felt vexed with her.

“You can go on with your work,” he said, “as Lady Mary so kindly proposes to read to us.”

Lady Mary opened her book, without even a glance at Martha, and began to read. For some time Oliver listened. She did not read well; but her voice was pleasant. He looked at Martha impatiently. He thought she might have tried to show her sense of the visitor’s courtesy instead of sitting so very still.

Martha lay back in her chair white and stiff-looking. Oliver waited. He thought she had fallen asleep; but all at once he exclaimed loudly. Lady Mary did not stop reading, she only roused her eyebrows in dismay at such a rude interruption. She was reading “Elaine,” and it seemed to her profanation that anyone should disturb the musical cadence of her voice.

“Please stop,” said Oliver, impetuously, “my sister’s ill.”

Then the fair reader looked off her book, and frowned at the white-faced, lifeless figure in the chair opposite.

“How very unfortunate,” she said, coldly, but without disturbing her attitude of languor. “Does your sister often faint?”

“Yes—no—I’m not sure;” then he got up and rang the bell. “What ought to be done, don’t you know? Can’t you do something?” he said, with the fright and eagerness to blame others that some men show in the presence of illness.

Lady Mary shook her head.

“I will fetch my maid,” she said. “She is very clever; but I am not used to fainting young ladies, I fear.”

Oliver was alarmed; he thought Martha looked death-like; he touched her hand, and it felt as chill as ice. The shock, in his weak condition, had completely unnerved him, and he could not think of any means of restoration for Martha. His only thought was that she

might sink down from her chair before assistance came, and he held her there firmly.

Lady Mary soon came back, with her maid and the chambermaid of the inn ; but she herself only stood at the door, and gave orders, to which no one paid any attention. The maid threw water plentifully over the pale face, so death-like in its stillness ; and, after a while, Martha began to sigh with effort, and at last opened her eyes. As soon as she could stand with help, the two women took her away, the maid promising Oliver to bring him news by-and-by.

Lady Mary tried to look compassionate ; but she could not help shrugging her shoulders, it was so thoroughly selfish and inconsiderate of this incomprehensible woman to interrupt her reading, and to give her brother such a shock.

“ I will go on reading,” she said, as soon as the door closed ; and she sat down and opened her book. It seemed to her so much better that Oliver should forget all about this little alarm.

She read a few lines, and then Oliver said,

"I beg your pardon, but I feel too anxious to listen. I so want to know how Martha is."

"Is she subject to these attacks?" Lady Mary closed her book, and spoke stiffly. She had gone back to her first opinion about Mr. Burridge—he certainly was very abrupt.

"I never heard of anything of the sort," he said; "but Maurice told me she was taken ill just in the same way about a fortnight ago, and he brought her round himself. I was unconscious at the time, I fancy, for he says she was sitting by my bedside when she went off."

Lady Mary flushed, and her eyes sparkled with anger.

"It seems to me that this is very serious," she said. "Your sister is evidently not in a fit state to be with you. I was quite sure this nursing was a mistake. She should have medical advice."

"I was just thinking the same thing," he said, "and I shall send for the doctor at once. Perhaps, in the meantime, you will be so kind as to find out how my sister is."

Lady Mary wished she had stayed in London, and yet she felt more than ever sure

that she had only just arrived in time to prevent an engagement between her son and this entirely objectionable Martha Burrridge.

She grew more compassionate, however, after the doctor's visit. He came into the sitting-room to speak to her, and told her that Miss Burrridge was seriously ill.

"I am not quite prepared to say what is the matter," he said; "but I am sure she needs pure air and rest, and she can't have either here; and then she should consult some experienced London physician."

"You will not tell her brother," she said; "it might do him harm."

The doctor smiled.

"It will not hurt my patient," he said, "and, as he will have to make the arrangements, I prefer to tell him myself his sister is worse than he is now."

Lady Mary bowed. She wished Maurice would come home; she felt defenceless among these rude, strong-willed people; but a message from Mr. Burrridge recalled her to his room.

He smiled when he saw her.

“How kind you are to come!” he said; “but I really want to know what you think; the doctor says my sister ought to go away as soon as she is fit for the journey.”

Lady Mary gave a sigh of relief. This would cut the knot of her perplexity, for she had resolved that Maurice should not have another chance of recovering Miss BurrIDGE from a fainting fit.

“I shall stay here as long as he does,” she had said to herself while she waited for the doctor’s verdict. She looked full of interest as she answered Oliver. “I quite agree with the doctor. Where do you think of sending her?”

“Well,” he said, “Mr. Fildon was advising me to have some sea-air after this, and he and I were talking of a nice quiet place he knows of in the Isle of Wight—Bemford. Do you know it?”

“I never heard of it.”

“No, I believe it is not fashionable. But I fancy”—he hesitated, and the change in his voice roused Lady Mary’s attention, which had begun to flag—“yes, I am almost sure, Miss

Ralston said they were all going to Bemford this autumn."

She smiled; it was not a significant smile, nothing to put him on his guard, but she looked so sweetly sympathetic that Oliver felt he had found a friend.

"Maurice is a lucky fellow," he said.

Lady Mary looked startled.

"Is he?" she said, gravely.

"I mean in having you for his mother," he said, in his blunt way; "there's no one like a mother, you know." He looked sad; now that he felt well enough, and wanted to pour out his hopes and plans to Martha, she was too ill to be of use.

"A wife is better." Lady Mary still smiled sweetly at him, though she was thinking how dreadful it would be to have a son who so seldom smiled, and who spoke out his meaning in such an abrupt, decided fashion. "No doubt you will have a charming wife some day."

"If I have a wife, she will be charming," and then he stopped, and Lady Mary sighed.

"How *gauché* he is to tell me another woman

is charming!" she thought, but she went on smiling.

"Yes, I think so too," she said, easily. "I believe, if I may make a guess, I have the pleasure of knowing her."

Oliver stared, and for a moment looked as if he meant to resent this raid on his confidence, and then he nodded and smiled too; it seemed to add assurance to his hope that a chance observer had noticed how matters stood between him and Gyneth.

"I only *hope* at present," he said; then he added, sharply—"May I ask who told you about it?"

She broke into a little silvery laugh, and leaned back in her chair with languid grace. Oliver thought what a useful friend she might be to Martha if Martha would only allow herself to be influenced.

"Ah! I see; you do not know the witch power women have in love matters, dear Mr. Burridge. I saw at a glance that there was but one woman in the world for you. I have been expecting to hear your engagement

announced. It is almost settled, I suppose?"

And then she gave him so smiling a look of superior knowledge in these matters that Oliver felt disposed to kiss the cream-coloured fingers that lay on her lap. He was always frank, and now, weakened by his illness, and drawn on by her sweet look of sympathy, he told her bit by bit the story of his love for Gyneth, and asked her to give him hope.

No wonder Lady Mary smiled re-assuringly; she felt sure such a love as this must win any girl, and she said so.

"But the great thing to do, my dear friend," she said, tenderly, "is to send your sister away as soon as possible; have you no one to send with her—she is not fit to be alone?"

"Yes, I think it can be managed," said Oliver; "but Martha must be quite well before she attempts the journey."

Lady Mary's lips looked rigid, and she gently shook her head.

"She will not get well here, that is very certain," she said; "this air is poisonous for her, I am sure."

She wished him good evening, and went away very happy. She felt assured of Maurice's safety; he was to be entirely separated from Martha, and Gyneth would marry Oliver. She was therefore free to plan out a marriage for her son suited in every way to his position.

"I see he must marry as soon as possible," she sighed, "or some one undesirable will marry him."

CHAPTER XXV.

DREAMING.

From Martha Burridge to Gyneth Ralston.

“DEAR MISS RALSTON,—I must apologise for not having answered your letter of inquiry for my brother some days sooner, but I have had much to do, and I am not a good correspondent, and also Mr. Penruddock said that he was writing to Mr. Venables, and would say how Oliver was.

“He goes on very well, and, but for weakness, would be quite himself again. Lady Mary Penruddock came a few days ago. She is very kind to my brother. She talks to him, and reads to him, very pleasantly, and this makes a nice change. Till now he has only

had Mr. Penruddock and me for company. He was so much pleased with your letter to me, and thought it so very kind of you to write about him. He asks me to give you his thanks and kindest remembrance. I am also to say that he hopes to go and see you when he returns to town, and that meantime he will be much obliged if you will send the name of the quiet place by the sea you told him about, as he wishes to send me there. I must ask you to excuse this letter; I am sure it must be very different from the letters you are accustomed to receive from your friends, but I cannot help being unlike other people. Believe me,

“Yours truly,

“MARTHA BURRIDGE.”

The handwriting was good and original. Louisa read the letter over her sister's shoulder, and laughed.

“Only fancy! Why, I could have written better than that two years ago. Your friend is too *gauche* for anything; you will never knock her into shape. You had better call in

my assistance, you will always be far too much afraid of hurting her feelings. She must be such a Yahoo, Kitty. I don't congratulate you on the sister-in-law," the last words were whispered, and, as Mr. Venables was deep in his paper, and Mrs. Venables was reading a letter, they were not overheard.

Gyneth frowned, and coloured.

"There was no need for you to read it," she said.

"Aunt!" Louisa went up to Mrs. Venables, and the sweet, dark eyes were raised with a slight protest, for they had only reached the third page of a double-sheeted letter.

"What is it, my dear?"

Louisa bent down, and kissed her.

"You shall go back to your letter in a minute, auntie; but do just imagine this scene. That sweet charming Lady Mary Penruddock has gone down to Awlford, has established herself there, and reads to our friend, Mr. Burridge. Only fancy her with this shy, red-haired Miss Burridge! Evidently poor dear Lady Mary has gone down, like a wolf on the fold, to stop

flirtation between your Admirable Crichton and the fair Martha."

Mrs. Venables smiled; but she was jarred by Louisa's flippancy.

"I do not think there is any flirtation," she said. "Mr. Penruddock is not a flirting man, I am sure." And she went back to her letter.

Louisa stood smiling. She was greatly amused. She had not a sympathetic nature, if the sympathy had to travel beyond objects close to herself. She could be extremely devoted to her aunt's headaches, because she liked nursing, and knew that she was clever at it. If her remedies were adopted, and her skill employed, her sympathy was always ready. But she had no sympathy for Oliver's sufferings, or for his sister's anxiety and devotion. She liked going to see poor women, who curtsied and thanked her and praised her sweet face, and made her feel herself a Lady Bountiful, while she read to them, or dispensed her tea and sugar; but she thought Gyneth quixotic and absurd to visit poor shy Miss Burridge, on whom she could confer no tangible benefit, and of whom she

would certainly be ashamed if she returned her visit. The notion of sympathy as a principle as well as a pleasure would not have occurred to this young woman; it seemed to her that all the flowers of life must of necessity belong to the rich, and that the weeds were for the poor. To be poor and ugly were, to Louisa, the two greatest afflictions that could fall to the lot of anyone, and therefore she was full of pity for those poorer than herself. It would never have occurred to her that in "poor Miss Burrige," as she persisted in calling her, some people, her sister Gyneth among the number, could find more sympathy than with herself. It had never occurred, either, to this fair, bright, flower-like maiden, how very much her own surroundings and her own advantages of dress and tendance, the innumerable daily luxuries which she took as a matter of course because she had always had them, had to do with her gaiety and the happiness she found in life. It is true that her own discomfiture, when a wet day deprived her of her ride or some other outdoor pleasure, might have warned her of the poverty of her resources; for she was apt to grow fret-

ful when she saw Gyneth painting or reading in evident happiness, instead of spending the morning tripping from the weather-glass to the window, and getting rid of her weariness in fretful interjections. She might have been touched in thinking how Martha Burrridge had got through the long hours between the dangerous period of Oliver's illness and his convalescence. But she had plenty of sympathy ready for Lady Mary. It was dreadful to think of her in an out-of-the-way country inn, having to associate with this uncouth young woman. She felt sure she was uncouth, spite of her sister's assurances that her new friend was only shy. Louisa was irritated by this new friendship, because she could not honestly find a reason for it in her sister's attachment for Oliver Burrridge.

"She likes him very much," the sharp-witted damsel argued, "but Kitty does not love Mr. Burrridge."

Meantime Gyneth was musing over this more than probable hope of association with Martha. It seemed to her that it would add a charm to her holiday by the sea; for when they were

all away together she got less of her aunt's companionship than she did at home. There was no club to take Mr. Venables from his wife, and he and her aunt had a way of renewing their honeymoon every autumn that left Gyneth very much to herself. This year she would have Louisa, whose holidays last year had been spent with another aunt in the North; but Gyneth knew without realizing it that Louisa would be even a less sympathetic companion by the sea than she was in London, and her sister's next words confirmed this feeling.

"Is this sea-side place so very quiet, then, uncle?" she said, with a fretful look in her fair face.

"Very quiet, my dear"—he did not look off his paper;—"there are no bathing-machines, but I hear the bathing is capital—such splendid sands!"

"Only fancy!" Louisa clasped her hands disconsolately; then, as she followed Gyneth, who had risen, out of the room, she said, sharply—"What a varied life ours will be, full of intense excitement—a long stretch of sand

to walk on and the society of Miss Martha Burridge. If Lady Mary would only go down there!"

Gyneth did not answer, but she earnestly hoped that such an idea would not occur to Lady Mary Penruddock. She felt very sorry for Martha, for she was sure her shyness must be painful; but it seemed impossible that she could ever feel at ease with Maurice's mother.

"And yet," she said to herself, "I should have thought it impossible that Lady Mary would get on with Mr. Burridge. Perhaps I do not understand her after all; she must be nice in some way, or her son would not be so fond of her."

But this thought set her off dreaming again. Gyneth had been in a very dreamy state ever since the news of Oliver's illness came, but she had thought more of Martha Burridge than of her brother. She was puzzled very much about the friendship between this strange, interesting girl and Mr. Penruddock. If Martha met them at the sea-side, then surely there would be walks and talks together, opportunities for confidence.

Gyneth was not inquisitive, but she longed to be of some help and comfort to Martha, and she felt that until she had her confidence she should not know how to help her. All at once the thought came that perhaps Mr. BurrIDGE might accompany his sister, and she shrank from this.

“I like him very much,” she said to herself, “but he is too absorbing; if he were there, I should not get on nearly so well with his sister Martha.”

There was a secret underlying feeling hardly acknowledged. If there was really an attachment between Martha and her brother’s friend, would not Mr. Penruddock come down to see her? but of late Gyneth had turned resolutely from any dreaming on the subject of Mr. Penruddock.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BREAKING THE ICE.

REUBEN TEW had just finished dinner, and was preparing to take up his usual post at the gate, ready to inspect every visitor who should present him or herself for admission to The Elms. His thoughts had lately been much troubled in regard to his young ladies. Here was the end of July, the season over, and, so far as he could find out, "our Miss Kitty" was as likely to remain single as ever.

"It's a great mistake," he had just repeated to his wife, while she cleared away the dinner. "It's spring-time now with Miss Kitty; but autumn 'll overtake her before she knows where she is, an' maybe she'll have to take up with a crooked stick at last. Miss Louisa has more time before her."

Mrs. Tew paused to listen, as she usually did to her husband's wisdom, her head slightly on one side, and her mouth half open with wondering admiration.

"It's strange, too," she said, "an' they so pretty."

Mr. Tew smiled at her with condescension.

"Bless you, Anne," he said, "prettiness has naught to do with marrying among gentlefolks now-a-days; so far as I can see, it's neither beauty nor conduct that wins, it's money, and who they belong to. If there's a title in the family, good Lord, how the moneyed ones will strive for it! It doesn't matter how black a man's conduct may have been, so long as he has anything to do with nobility, he may be a very low cad indeed. And these rich young brewers and bankers, and such like, they're just the same. It don't matter to them how fast their wives have been, so long as they can bring blood into the family. An' don't you see, Anne, our ladies has neither money nor title."

"They are ladies, surely?" Anne looked frightened, as if her question savoured of heresy.

Reuben turned his back on her, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Good Lord!” he said, sneering, “what fools women are—the best on ’em, too. Bless me, missus,” he turned half round to his wife, “if I say a pink ain’t a picotee, it stands to reason I don’t say it ain’t a flower at all; but you mustn’t worry your brains, old woman,” he added, in a soothing tone, “with talking what’s beyond ’em. Miss Kitty an’ her sister is true ladies; but maybe they are a trifle more particular than some ladies is; an’ it don’t seem to me that Miss Kitty is anxious for a husband—eh! what do you say, missus?”

Mrs. Tew had few decided opinions, and she certainly would never have quoted one to Reuben, it would only have been giving him back his own at second-hand; but she saw that she was expected to speak.

“Isn’t she?” she said, her face keeping quite unmoved and placid. “I thought all girls was anxious for that.”

“Well,” Reuben nodded approvingly, “I think they should be. It is a great matter for

a woman to get married to a good man—why, he's everything to her; an' even if she gets a bad 'un—at least, she gets more variety in life than she'd get as a single woman. I don't hold with old maids. Women is parts of men, an' was made to belong to 'em, an' to bear children. An old maid, or a married woman without a child, is as much out of the place they was intended for as a horse which never leaves his stable—the one takes to kicking, an' the others does pretty much the same; they judges for everyone else, an' finds fault all round."

"Is Miss Kitty going to be a old maid?"—a faint troubled look had come into the placid face.

Reuben raised his eyebrows.

"Don't you go for to put that about as I said so,"—he spoke rather hurriedly; he knew that his wife was proud of quoting the pearls of wisdom that fell from his lips. "What I say is, that Miss Kitty might have the engineering gentleman if she chose. I kep' a eye on him the day of that there garden-party; an' he's very hard hit is Mr. Burridge; an' our master says to me, says he, 'That will be a very great man before

he dies, Tew,' an' ever since then I have been expecting to hear as he's asked Miss Kitty; but he hasn't done it yet."

Mrs. Tew looked admiringly at her oracle; she did not ask him "why," because she knew he would tell her.

He raised his right hand emphatically.

"Look you here, Anne, there's things as is doubtful an' things as is sure,"—he always held his chin high when he was instructing, he had so strong a feeling that he was doing a duty to his generation; "the sure thing is that you can always tell whether a man's got what he wants, or whether he's still hankering for it. If this Mr. Burridge had asked Miss Kitty, an' she'd said No, he'd have gone off in a temper, an' would never come nigh the place again; an' if she said Yes, he'd have been so overrun with his joy that some of it would have runned over. No, no, he's done neither yet; but you may depend he'll come before long. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, is an old proverb, an' a true one more than often."

Reuben Tew liked to pass as a prophet to his believing spouse. That very morning he had asked Mr. Venables how the sick gentleman was going on, and had been told that he was convalescent and was coming up to town, but there was no need to tell Anne his sources of information; "women was made for man," was his favourite argument, "and the way to keep 'em in their places is to tell 'em as little as possible that don't concern themselves;" but, as sometimes when he was in an extra-cheerful mood, his practice did not quite tally with his theory, he bethought himself that, as he fully expected Mr. Burridge this afternoon, it would be safer to step to the gate, where Anne never came unless called for; he should be in no danger then of spoiling the effect of his prophecy.

The road looked dull and dry and dusty; the leaves on the hedge opposite were so drab-coloured that it was wonderful they did not fall withered into the dust below them, choked out of life; it was a grey day, with low, heavy clouds that seemed rain-charged and made the air oppressive.

Oliver felt very tired, even by the little walk from the cottage to The Elms. Reuben was looking towards London, and he did not see the visitor coming till he turned round, then he was struck by the change in Mr. Burridge's appearance; he was so pale and thin, and he looked very delicate as he nodded to Mr. Tew.

"All well, I hope," he said, more graciously than usual, for already he felt himself one of the family at The Elms; always hopeful, that sweetly-worded letter of inquiry had so raised his hopes that the confidence of them had hastened his recovery, and now he had come the day after his arrival in town to ask permission to speak to Gyneth. Lady Mary's attentions and her gentle flattery had increased his self-confidence; she, he thought, was far more fanciful than Gyneth was, and she had sought him of her own accord. He loved this girl so dearly, so strongly, that she must love him too. "Why not?" he asked himself. "Have I not always won all I wanted?"

And yet the doubt which always follows love so closely—the shadow of his brightness—made

Oliver yet paler, and made his heart beat nervously as he went along the pine-bordered walk to the house. He had been away for so many weeks—who could tell what might not have happened to Gyneth?—and then his very love for her came to re-assure him, and told him that, if she loved him ever so little, such a nature as hers was too noble for caprice. Love for him would have gone on growing in her heart; his illness even would have developed it from her anxiety about him. And yet when he was shown into Mr. Venables' study, a cold fear crept over him again, even while his hearty old friend was shaking both his hands vigorously and congratulating him on his escape and his recovery.

“You are all well?” said Oliver, awkwardly.

“Yes, thank you, we are all well; how did you leave your sister? But I suppose she has come up with you?”

“Well, no; she was so very poorly that I sent her off at once to Bemford.”

“The anxiety and nursing were too much for her, I suppose,” said Mr. Venables.

"I don't know; I fear they must count for something, but the doctor at Awlford hinted at some more serious illness unless she at once took a rest; he said the sea would be good for her. You told me about Bemford, you know."

"Yes; Kitty is delighted at the prospect of meeting Miss Burridge there; I daresay we may be there a couple of months, as we have given up the Continent."

"Really; I fancied you always went abroad first, and then settled down by the sea when you came back."

"Yes, we have generally done that, but Mrs. Venables is not very strong this year, and we don't want to go so far from her doctor."

"I am glad," Oliver said, and then he thought what perfect happiness it would be to take walks with Gyneth beside the sea; he should get chances he could never have in London.

"Come in and see them all," said Mr. Venables; "they will be so glad to see you again. How about the strike?"

Oliver was taken aback; he was ashamed to

confess to this practical man of the world that, as soon as he got leave from his doctor, he had hurried up to town to know his fate, without even waiting to be present at a fresh trial of the improvement.

"All right, I hope," he said; "but I so wanted to see you that I came up at once."

Mr. Venables smiled. He had a strong suspicion of the motive of this visit, and he only hoped he was right.

"I don't know"—Oliver spoke hurriedly, and he did not look at his companion,—“but perhaps you may have seen that I care very much for your eldest niece, and I—I wish to be allowed to tell her so.”

He had grown so red and looked so defiant that Mr. Venables felt inclined to laugh at him.

"I'm very glad to hear this, Burridge," he said; "I guessed it; speak to her by all means."

"Thank you; but oughtn't I to tell you exactly what are my means of keeping a wife?"

Mr. Venables laughed.

"I don't fancy you can do that very accurately," he said; "the success of your work will

make a large difference to you, I expect—more difference than perhaps you count on.” Then, putting his hand on the young man’s shoulder, he said—“I feel quite sure you would not come and ask me for my niece unless you felt justified in doing so; now let us go and find her, and I wish you success.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PROPOSAL.

GYNETH was not in the drawing-room ; Mrs. Venables was sitting there alone, ready to take a drive. She gave Oliver a far more cordial welcome than she had given him before, and her sweet, dark eyes grew liquid as she spoke of his illness and his sister's anxiety.

Oliver was in too impatient a condition to pay much heed to the feelings of others, but he was touched by her kindness and the warmth of her interest. Mrs. Venables did not appreciate him as Lady Mary did ; but then, of course, she knew far less of him ; it could not have occurred to Oliver that she might like him less if they became more intimate.

"I am waiting for my nieces," she said; "we are driving to Richmond this afternoon."

Mr. Venables looked worried; he fidgeted up and down the room, and his wife saw that something was wrong with him. She looked at Oliver, and a light dawned on her; with it came a strong dislike to what she feared was his errand at The Elms. She at least would do nothing to forward it. Her husband was so accustomed to have his wishes guessed at and fulfilled without the trouble of expressing them that he began to frown when she remained silent.

"You don't want both the girls," he said, abruptly, "do you? and I want Kitty—at least, Mr. BurrIDGE wants to speak to her."

Mrs. Venables was vexed now; she thought her husband would certainly have consulted her before he gave his consent in this independent manner to Mr. BurrIDGE. She spoke very coldly as she answered—

"Will you ring the bell, please, and I will send Kitty word that you want her to stay in?"

But when the butler appeared Mr. Venables gave the message himself.

“Let Miss Ralston know,” he said, “that I want her in the garden, and that Mrs. Venables does not want her for the drive.” Then he turned to Oliver. “Come out and look at the river—won’t you? it’s high tide just now.”

They went, leaving Mrs. Venables to struggle with a strong temptation. She very rarely differed from her husband; she had a sort of tender blindness to his little faults and foibles, feeling that he was a good man, and that, as she was not perfect herself, she had no right to expect perfection from him. But this was a very serious matter; it involved the happiness of Kitty’s whole life, and she felt quite angry with Charles. The girl would be taken by surprise, and say “Yes,” when perhaps a little longer waiting would bring a different answer. Kitty ought to be warned of what lay before her. And yet Mrs. Venables had never exerted her will consciously against her husband’s, and she had read his meaning perfectly—he did not wish for her interference. It was plain he wished her out of the way, so that Kitty might use her own unbiassed judgment,

and a sharp pang made the loving wife's heart ache ; it was the first time in a matter wholly unconnected with business that her husband had not preferred her judgment to his own. Well, this was perhaps her own fault, for her loyalty suffered in blaming Charles ; it seemed like a severance of the oneness which made their life so happy. She had always shown dislike to Mr. Burridge—more, she believed, from an intuitive dread of this which was now to be accomplished than because she knew much about the man himself.

“She will marry him,” she said, with a look of care on her serene face quite unusual to it, “because his love will move her into the belief that she loves him, and she knows no more about love,” said the middle-aged lady, her delicate skin flushing with excitement, “than Louisa does—at least, I think not.” She stopped, remembering a vague suspicion she had had after Mr. Penruddock's last visit ; but then that was only surmise, and it was evident that Mr. Penruddock had no serious intentions, or he would have returned to The

Elms. There had been plenty of time for another visit before his journey to Awlford.

“After all,” said Mrs. Venables, thoughtfully, “it may be better that she should marry Mr. Burridge, he is very much in love, and Charles says he has a brilliant future before him. My Kitty is too delicate and too refined for the constant anxieties and petty shifts she must have as a poor man’s wife, and Lady Mary told me—pointedly, I thought—that her son must be poor till her death, unless he marries an heiress. Well, I don’t know, I think if our darling Charlie had lived, he need not have been poor till I died, supposing he was all I had left to live for; but, then,” she raised her head, with a happy look of confidence, “my husband would never have made such a silly will as Colonel Penruddock did.”

The memory of her lost darling always soothed Mrs. Venables back to her usual bright sweetness, her rebellious wishes were firmly put under restraint, and, when Louisa made her appearance, they drove off together without one inquiry from the aunt about Gyneth.

Her uncle's message had not aroused any suspicion in the girl's mind. She did not care for the long drive to Richmond, and felt glad to have the afternoon to do as she pleased with. So she snatched up her hat, and went out, by the garden door, in search of Mr. Venables.

Long before she reached the terrace she saw him walking up and down, and she recognized his companion.

She could not help some slight agitation, for Louisa's constant teasing spite of her sister's prohibition made Gyneth feel conscious now even if Oliver's name were mentioned; and, besides, when she had thought him dying she had so repented her last coldness to him that this seemed a good opportunity of atonement. And yet, she fancied—it might be because of her uncle's presence—that she felt herself shrink from Oliver to-day; and then she tried to make up for this first movement by a forced show of sympathy and friendliness.

She succeeded so well in this that her uncle smiled at Oliver.

"You don't want me," he said; then, to Gyneth. "I leave Mr. Burrridge to you, my dear; I have some business waiting for me in my study."

Louisa would at once have gathered that there was something special in this wish; but Gyneth saw nothing unusual in it. She and Mr. Burrridge had always been great friends, and somehow the *hiatus* that had come in their friendship since Louisa's return was for the moment as if it had not been; there was the old frankness in her eyes as she looked up at Oliver.

"Yes, indeed," she said, "I want to hear all about the strike, and especially about your illness. It has been so sad for your poor sister."

While she spoke Oliver had kept his eyes from resting on her face, for he knew how full of love they were, and he did not want to take her by surprise; but now he looked away from the grey river, and their eyes met. The consciousness that Louisa's teasing had awakened in her sister came back to Gyneth. For an instant she felt inclined to escape from Oliver;

but this was checked as soon as it came, and she began to question him rapidly.

“Are you really quite well again—as strong as ever you were? Do you think those miserable men meant to murder you? Tell me how it was done, for, you know, we have only heard fragments.”

“I don’t think the attack was at all intentional,”—he began to walk along the terrace, and Gyneth walked beside him. “I believe the first stone was thrown by a boy; but the blow that knocked me over was struck by a wooden clog, I think. Of course, when men of that determined sort are set off, they act from a mad impulse—they have no thoughts for consequences.”

“You might have been killed.” She gave him a pitiful look.

He bent over her as they walked.

“Should you have grieved?”

This time Gyneth looked up in surprise.

“Of course,” she said; she thought he ought not to have asked her this; “and it would have been so sad for your sister. Has she come back with you?”

“No, she is not strong; she has gone to Bemford.” Oliver spoke abruptly; the interruption chafed him.

“She has not gone alone, has she?—it will be so very dull for her there all alone.”

Oliver was growing very irritable; he wanted to get rid of all this common-place talk—talk he might have with anyone. It seemed to him that he could not get hold of the conversation, and he had sworn to himself that he would not be abrupt; Gyneth should not be startled out of her gentle sweetness, what he had to say should come naturally.

“I don’t think Martha would mind any amount of dulness. But she is not alone; our old servant went to Bemford first to get rooms, and then came and met Martha.”

“Then how do you manage?”

“Oh, very well; some one takes care of the cottage, and does all I want; and I am soon going back to Awlford.”

Gyneth looked alarmed. “Will you be safe there?” she said, and she looked earnestly at him.

Oliver could not stop to consider whether her

anxiety for him was caused by love or pity ; it was genuine anxiety, at least, and his self-restraint had lasted long enough—it had made his manner so hard and cold that Gyneth was completely off her guard, and she added, impulsively,

“If you will not be careful for your own sake, you must think of your sister and of your friends.” She said this warmly.

They had reached the end of the terrace and stood looking up the river ; the sky was heavy and leaden, and there was not so much as a ripple on the water.

All at once Oliver took Gyneth’s hand.

“I will think of you, if you will say I may do so—if my safety is really dear to you. If you knew,” he went on fast, his ardent eyes fixed on her face, “how, while I lay there helpless, longing to be about again so that I might be with you—if you could only know how this moment was before me all that weary time!—it has been with me always—awake and in my dreams as well. Gyneth, you are the only woman I have ever loved—you have both the spring and the

fulness of my life ; I can never tell you the love I feel for you."

He had poured this out in a torrent of passionate words, his cheeks flaming and his eyes dark with excitement, while they fixed intensely on her sweet face. She trembled and flinched as his emotion stirred her sympathetic nature, but she did not lose self-possession, she was thinking of Oliver, not of herself, as she spoke.

"You are very good to me," she said, gently withdrawing her hand, but she did not look at him—"indeed, I think you have too good an opinion of me; if you knew me better, you would find that I am not worth such a love as you offer—I could never return it."

How sweetly her words fell on his ears! how he hungered to take her to his heart and tell her that his love would compel hers—that she must be his!

"I do not fear," he said; "if you only love me a little I am content. How can I expect you to think of me as I have thought of you ever since I first saw you?"

"Have you really loved me so long?" she

said, with frightened eyes, for she remembered Louisa's warning about encouraging Mr. Burridge. "Indeed I have thought of you only as a friend."

"You told me once," he said, passionately, and he began to walk rapidly along the terrace, Gyneth following, spelled by the mere strength of his will, "that I was the first friend, except your aunt, you had ever had; when you said that, I determined to win you, for I had only feared that you might love already." Then, as she did not answer, he went on vehemently, "Do not drive me mad by telling me you have learned to love some one else while I have been lying ill!"

She grew red as he looked angrily at her, and his anger flamed out. He caught her hand. "Tell me it is not so!" He spoke hoarsely, as if he suffered agony, and the girl was touched.

"No—no," she said, soothingly, drawing her hand away, "I do not love anyone——"

"Thank God!" He pressed his hand over his eyes, and stood still a moment before he spoke again.

They were near the end of the terrace, where the old stone seat was built against the wall; the seat was strewn with the dark velvet petals of a crimson rose that climbed along the wall above it. Oliver pointed to the bench.

“Shall we sit here?” he said, and seated himself before Gyneth could answer. She sat down unwillingly; she wished to end this talk which yet had a painful fascination for her, but Oliver did not give her time to think.

“Forgive me,” he said, “I know how rough and violent I must seem to you—you who are so sweet, and gentle, and courteous to all—but my feelings are different; they are so strong that they overmaster me. Thank you, dearest and kindest of girls, for giving me such a blessed relief; if you love no one else, I have no fear. Do not think me vain and self-confident; again I say I am quite unworthy of such sweet gentleness; but I will be what you wish, my own love—I will do anything, everything, if only at the last I win your love. Say you will try to love me, Gyneth.”

He took her hand again in his, and held it

firmly, and Gyneth felt that his will had power over her; for a moment she asked herself whether she did not love Oliver, whether she ought not to accept such a love as this, and then nature protested, and she drew her hand steadily away.

"Please be patient with me," she said; "I don't know what to say to you, because I can't make out my own feelings."

Oliver bent over her fondly.

"Do not try, darling," he murmured; "give yourself up to your feelings, and they will lead you rightly."

She answered his passionate look with a little rippling laugh.

This disconcerted him, and he drew further away from her. Gyneth was glad; she breathed more freely.

"Just now my feeling is that I know nothing of love. I—I don't think," she went on, "that I have the power of loving in me; friendship I can understand, and I will always be your friend, but I am sure I could never love as you wish to be loved."

"You mistake," he began, eagerly; but Gyneth held up her hand.

"Please let me finish," she said. "You think now that you would be satisfied with my feeling for you, but indeed you would not; you would be always dissatisfied, and perhaps you would end by hating me—indeed you had better give your love to some one who will love you in return as you deserve to be loved."

"Your own words tell me that you mistake your own feelings," he said, eagerly. "If you think I deserve to be loved, then you do see something to love in me. Oh! my darling, do let me love you in hope; I ask only this—let me try to win you."

She shook her head sadly.

"But if, after trying, you fail—will it not be worse for you than as if you had never tried?"

"You sweet darling," he said, and he took her hand between both his, "do not fear for me—the very trial will give me happiness you do not dream of, and I shall not fail; I have always succeeded in all I have aimed at. Surely when the prize is so much higher, so infinitely

dearer than anything else, I shall strive so earnestly that I must win it"—his eyes glistened with fervour—"at least, you wish me success—do you not?"

Gyneth hesitated.

"You have urged me on," she said, nervously, "to say more than I meant to say. I said just now that I don't understand my own feelings." She paused; but he was too deeply interested to speak. "All I am certain of is that I wish you to be happy, and that I do not wish to bring sorrow into your life, for indeed I do like you very much, but——"

Oliver stood for a moment speechless; he had never been so happy in his life; then he raised her small ungloved hand to his lips.

"I am satisfied. You have made me so happy that I do not know how to thank you," he said; "you are an angel."

Then he came close up to her, but Gyneth shrank away.

"Please let me go now," she said.

In spite of his words, he was disappointed, but he loved her too dearly to cross her slight-

est wish, and the very strength of his love quickened his perception of her feeling; he knew that he was still on trial, and that he must be more than ever careful not to break through in any open way the barrier she had put between them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“DUTY LETTERS.”

OLIVER saw that she wished him to leave her, and he hurried back to the house; he seemed to be moving in a dream, so little could he believe in his good fortune, and yet, when he reached the study, and felt he must put into words what had taken place, he did not know what to tell Mr. Venables.

“Well”—the brisk, bright-eyed gentleman pushed up his spectacles, and looked with an amused smile at Oliver’s excited face—“good news—eh, Burridge?”

“She is an angel,” said Oliver.

Mr. Venables was slightly surprised; he had not fancied Gyneth would consent so easily.

"That's all right," he laughed; "and when is it to be?"

Oliver's bright face clouded.

"You are going a little too fast," he said, "but I feel sure all will come right. At present I am on trial; but I have little fear," he said, confidently.

Mr. Venables whistled.

"On trial,"—he shook his head. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Kitty is a good girl enough; but there's a touch of the weathercock in every woman I ever saw, except my wife, and perhaps I might have found it in her if I had let her take me on trial. You're too easy by half, and I should not have expected it. I should have fixed her."

Oliver had grown very red; there was a touch of sarcasm in the old gentleman's voice which galled him, and made him inclined to bluster.

"Oh! it's all very well," he said, with a forced laugh, "for you to sit here, Mr. Venables, and settle lovers' ways for them. I believe I've acted for the best in respecting your niece's

wishes, and after all I shall be down here again in a day or so. I feel it a privilege to be allowed this right to win her.”

“Well, I daresay you’re right; everyone knows his own affairs best, and I remark that most things have changed within the last thirty or forty years. I got ‘Yes’ when I proposed. According to your arrangement, then, I suppose the thing is not to be talked about at present?”

“So far as I am concerned you may tell everyone you choose,” said Oliver; “but let it be just as she wishes,”—he said this in a subdued tone, which seemed to amuse Mr. Venables.

“Come and dine with us the day after to-morrow,” he said, laughing, “and then perhaps you and Kitty will come to a more settled agreement.”

“Thank you,” said Burrage; and then he took leave, very glad to be beyond reach of his future uncle’s sarcasm.

Mrs. Tew came to the cottage door, and watched him while he went out at the gate, just giving Reuben a nod as he passed him.

Presently she saw Miss Ralston come slowly towards the house. Anne waited a few moments, and then, as Mr. Tew did not turn round, she called out "Reuben."

He did not answer, so she came out, crawling at a snail's pace till she reached his elbow. She was a most dutiful and submissive wife; but she sometimes enjoyed a joke at the expense of her lord.

"I wants to know, Reuben," she said, "whether you think there's been anything settled between that gentleman and Miss Kitty to-day?"

Reuben looked superior in an instant, he wrinkled the bridge of his nose, and the corners of his mouth drooped with pity.

"Lord love you, old woman, you're too wise to live! The good gentleman asked for the master."

"So he did, Reuben dear,"—she did not often venture to be familiar, and Reuben winced. Something warned him that the faithful Anne knew she had the best of it; he thought it wisest to be silent;—"but I noticed that Miss

Kitty stayed at home instead of going with her aunt, and she have just come in from the garden now, and she looks serious.”

“You’re too clever to live,” he said, with severe scorn. “Mr. BurrIDGE comed out o’ the house.”

“Ah! but, Reuben,” Anne spoke very humbly, “while you was at the gate I was at the window, an’ it ain’t more than five minutes or so since the gentleman comed along the very same way which Miss Kitty did.”

“Trust a woman for gaping at a window,” said Tew—he had been staring out into the road ever since Mr. BurrIDGE’s arrival,—“as aimless as a fly; ’tis the way with you all.”

“Yes; but, Reuben, I want to hear which way you think it have gone. Do you think Miss Kitty have said No, or Yes?”

“You want to know too much, my woman,” said Reuben, irritably. “There, go indoors—go in and darn my stockings. You mustn’t let yourself grow inquisitive, missus. Consarn it,” he said to himself, when she had departed, “now I think over it, there was something different in

the manner of him ; but I'll be hanged if I can say what it was. Well, I shall know when he comes again. To think of Anne taking upon herself to watch at the window, too ! Well, I *am* blowned."

Oliver was hurrying to London ; he longed for some one to whom he could tell his good fortune. If Martha had been at home, he would have gone back to the cottage and poured out all his joys and his hopes, now he could only get rid of his feelings in writing ; but when he had reached his office and settled himself at his desk, he did not begin by writing to Martha. He could not have explained why, but, in some incomprehensible way, Lady Mary had grown to be more of a confidant of his love for Gyneth Ralston than Martha had ever been ; she was so much more sympathetic, he said to himself—it seemed as if she took a personal interest in his success ; he did not know that he had hit the truth, and the secret of the sympathy he felt with Maurice's mother lay in her determination to put a permanent bar between her son and Gyneth Ralston.

He began to write, and then he paused.

“There is no need,” he thought “to say anything about being on trial; I believe I was faint-hearted to think it. I blurted it out too quickly, and she was taken by surprise. Who can say that next time I see this dear girl I may not win her altogether? There is no need to be too explicit with Lady Mary; it shall all be settled before she comes back to town.” So he wrote, and asked for his kind friend’s good wishes on his engagement to Miss Ralston.

Next he wrote to Martha; though he meant to be reticent, he could not help pouring out his joy and happiness. He told her the family at The Elms would be very soon at Bemford, and he urged her to struggle against her shyness and be as cordial and pleasant as she could to all of them, especially to Gyneth—“my Gyneth,” he called her.

This letter cost him much more effort than the first one, for he feared its effect on Martha; the doctor had said that Miss BurrIDGE must be spared all sudden shocks and worries; any irritation or shock to the nerves might bring on

the terrible suspension of consciousness ; he said he feared her heart was affected, but that in the overwrought state she was in, from anxiety and want of sleep, it was impossible to form any certain judgment as to her state ; when she had rested and recruited herself at Bemford, she ought to go home and consult a London physician. Oliver could not help dreading the effect of his letter on Martha, and yet it was necessary to tell her his news before the party at The Elms reached Bemford. “ Besides,” he argued, “ if I did not tell her, my letter would be stiff and constrained—she would see I kept something from her, and I believe it would almost kill Martha if she thought she was not in my confidence.”

He read his letter carefully, and then he sighed.

“ It must wound her any way,” he said. “ Poor dear Martha, if she had had money, perhaps she would have been a miser—she can’t bear to part from anything that has been hers ; I believe she considers that she has a better right to me than anyone else has.”

Then he gave a deep sigh of relief; the duty-letters were done, for he had asked Lady Mary to tell Maurice the good news, and now he could give himself up to happiness and Gyneth. How fast he wrote now!—the words seemed to fly from his pen, burning with the passionate love they expressed.

“The strength of my love,” he wrote, “made me dumb and foolish this morning, but, indeed, what could I have said worthy of what I asked for? As I sit here writing to you it is all like a dream; I cannot believe that you, so sweet, so gentle, so, in every way, loveable, have consented to listen to me, and that you will be my very own, for you will—will you not?—I can never tell you the powerful influence for good you possess over me; I feel that you may make of me what you will—all I do in the future will be your work in me. My beloved, I am apt to be self-confident—boastful, it may be, when I feel myself under-valued, but this can never be again. When I measure myself with you, I can never again be vain, and your goodness will help to keep me humble; henceforth I

dedicate myself to you—your sweet eyes are my guiding stars.”

He went on in this strain till he had covered a good deal of paper, and then he thought he had better finish and consider his Awlford letters, and the now hateful necessity of returning there. Yes, he must go back and get over the business of again trying the improvement with as little delay as possible ; but he must see Gyneth once more before he went away.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DRIFTING.

GYNETH sat thinking ; she was alone in her bed-room—a very special room indeed in its quaint unlikeness to any other bed-chamber. It was long and narrow, and was entered through a little ante-room, cut, as it were, out of its side, so that, when you came in facing the pleasant window that looked out on the river, a third of the room was behind you on the right, and this made a charming library, screened in a circular-headed alcove with shelves reaching from floor to ceiling. The tiny brass bedstead lay snugly along the wall beside the window ; the fireplace came mid-way between the alcove and the bed, with a small, straight sofa on one side, and an easy-chair on the other, and in

front of this was a writing-table which looked as if it were used for study as well as for mere letter-writing.

Everything in the room spoke of comfort and culture—of beauty even, for some charming sketches hung on the walls, and the decoration of the room was both simple and full of taste. The view from the window was enough in itself to fix attention, and to suggest poetic and tender thoughts by the hour together to a dreamer like the owner of the room; and for years she had been happy in these thoughts—not content to dwell with them, for she was ever seeking, after the fashion of dreamers, a “better” to every beautiful vision she called up in her reveries. The longing after perfect beauty and perfect love, which surely owns a divine origin, was awake in Gyneth’s heart, and long ago she had told herself that till she could find on earth the counterpart of her ideal she would not stifle this visionary, half realized longing by putting a make-believe in its stead. She had been, before Louisa’s coming home, so much left to herself that she had been content to go

on thinking, or rather dreaming, her faculties away; for she had no purpose in her life except duty—no one to live for, she thought, but her poor people and school-children.

If she had tried to concentrate thought on any one point, the result would perhaps have found its way into writing; but this vague dreaminess had been fatal to intellectual exertion, except in the way of storing her mind from books.

Louisa's return had roused her from these delicious if lazy reveries, and had overturned, as she said, her whole life. For the first few weeks there had been over all, the exquisite unreality of freshness, that blue and silver atmosphere in which, according to some accomplished writers, people spend their lives, but which, alas! is of such short duration. But Gyneth soon found that Louisa had no sympathy for any inner life; she thought it a bore to discuss theories or ideas, and she considered reading as a regular pursuit, a mere waste of time; it should only, this bright, complacent, blue-eyed maiden argued, be used as a pastime.

“On a wet afternoon, for instance, or when one is expecting visitors, or on a railway journey, a book is in its right place; it only makes a girl heavy and pedantic if she goes in for reading. I have seen it at school, I assure you,” Louisa had said, confidently, when her sister shyly showed her a plan of study she had made out to fill their mornings with.

It might be a fuller craving for sympathy after this disappointment—Gyneth could not tell what it was—but when she thought of herself in the sweet spring-time of this year, and then let herself return to the state of discontent and general dissatisfaction in which the autumn had found her, she felt very severe against what she called her own ingratitude.

She had so often longed for Louisa in those days that seemed so far off now, and now it seemed that those peaceful, happy days had been a spring-time of ignorance—for surely it could not be only her sister's presence and her sister's talk that had stirred up such unrest. It was more than unrest—it was a faith in worldly things, which she had thought would never come

to her—a longing for an earthly realization of that happiness which she had almost taught herself was too perfect for earth. She could not date this troubled longing. Once she fancied that it kindled into fresh life at the name of Maurice Penruddock; but the fancy was hushed so imperatively by a womanly shrinking from the thought of one who evidently spent no thoughts on her, that she was left helpless, troubled, not in any great degree, with a disturbed unrest, quite at variance with the poetic fancies of her girlhood.

And now she sat, on the morning after Oliver's visit, reflecting on what she had done. When he left her she had told herself that she was not engaged to Mr. BurrIDGE; but then, when Mrs. Venables and Louisa came in, she saw her uncle in the carriage with them, and she guessed that he had walked out to meet them, and had told her aunt what had been happening in her absence. Her aunt came up to her and kissed her when they met in the drawing-room before dinner; and Louisa had been radiant with delight, though she had

refrained from teasing when Gyneth begged to be left in peace. It was all very well to say to herself that she was not engaged, but it seemed to be just the same ; and, when next Mr. BurrIDGE came, she felt sure they would all go away and leave her alone with him—and this was just what she most dreaded. All her security in his quiet friendship had departed. She leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes. She was very pale, and there were dark grey circles, deeper than shadows, below her long eyelashes. She did not dislike Mr. BurrIDGE. She had always liked him, why, then, did she every now and then feel such an uncontrollable shrinking from him ? Perhaps this was love. She had heard that love was a feeling made up of hopes and fears, and that doubt was a necessary element of love. Love ! what an awful overpowering feeling it had always seemed to her ! When she had read it described in books, or poetry, she had even thought it sinful. It seemed like idolatry when two people were wholly devoted to one another. Did this grow, or did it come at once ? Gyneth had thought about these things before in her

vague time of dreaming; but now they were real subjects. She felt so close to them that it behoved her to examine them carefully. She shook her head in strong denial. No—love did not grow in that sense. It increased, doubtless; and, as two loving souls lived together, each year would make their union more complete and more harmonious, till at last there would be but one will between them. But the mighty gift of true love came, Gyneth felt sure, like every other gift of God, at once to the heart. “One may have doubts and fears, but one can never really shrink from the man one loves, if love is real,” she thought.

Then again she argued—for it seemed to her that this perplexity could not go on, she must find her way out of it—everyone did not have decided gifts, and it was very evident that there were different degrees in love. She thought over all her married friends, and she could not call to mind any among them who seemed to live in such an atmosphere of perfect love and trust in each other as her uncle and aunt did. They rarely spoke of one another, and yet if

they were parted for more than a day, they seemed only to be half themselves, dull and depressed. Possibly this great gift of love was not to be hers ; but, if she could make another's life happy by giving up her own to it, surely she must be doing right.

But still even this idea which seemed to be built on duty and self-sacrifice, without a thought of self-love in it, did not quiet Gyneth. Something—she could not tell what it was, but it seemed to be growing plainer—told her that she had done a wrong in giving hope to Mr. Burridge. She got up and went to the window, and for a moment the sight of the river, glittering now like burnished fish-scales in the sunshine, soothed her trouble and carried her away from herself. How bright and smiling the world looked, and what was she about—fretting and worrying over what most girls would be glad and proud of—the possession of an honest love, for Gyneth felt how true and frank was Oliver's nature.

Something struck at her heart with sharp pain. What brought it there? As she looked

across the garden, she got another peep at the fair river this time through the crossing branches of two huge over-leafy elms, and at the instant a boat came into sight and went lazily past; a girl sat lapping her hand into the water, and facing her was a man who, while he rowed, kept his eyes fixed on the girl's face.

"Yes, that is love," said Gyneth, but the pain did not go away as the boat drifted out of sight—and she knew the secret of it.

She might—she felt certain she should one day—know this tyrant, all-absorbing feeling, and if it should not be for Mr. BurrIDGE! She covered her eyes with her hands. The turmoil of these summer and autumn months faded, and she was once more in her own sweet spring-time of youth. Oh, how much younger and more light of heart, and her ideal revived and stood out clearly—far more clearly than it had done in the dream-days.

Gyneth cowered before its distinctness; she shrank away from the window, and flung herself, face downwards, on her bed; she knew

that Mr. Burridge could never be her ideal.

“It is a dream—a fancy,” she said; “he may be quite different from what I have pictured him; besides, he cares nothing about me, and I surely could not love unless I was sought.”

She started up, her eyes wide with alarm, her feelings frightened her by their strength; her face had flushed, and she covered her eyes with her hands, as if to hide her thoughts from the light.

She lay down again, tired of the ineffectual struggle, for she could not banish this disquiet. She could not tell how long she had been thus engaged when there came a tapping at the door; she did not feel able to bear congratulation or joking just now, and she feared this was Louisa, but when she opened the door there was her maid with Oliver’s letter.

Gyneth sat down to her table to read it with a sort of weary repugnance, but as she read her cheeks flushed warmly, and tears swam in her sweet, dark eyes.

“How good and noble he is!” the girl said, in a hushed voice, “and he calls me his superior.

Oh, if he did but know how unworthy I am of all this true and ardent love! I must try to be worthy of it." Her eyes grew bright with enthusiasm. "I cannot reject his love and make him unhappy for what is only a fancy—a mere shadow. Surely duty is better than any ideal worship, and if I try to make him happy for the sake of duty, who knows but love may come?"

She put the letter away among her treasures; she would not answer it, it would be something to talk about with the writer when he came tomorrow.

CHAPTER XXX.

MOTHER AND SON.

LADY MARY read her letter through with sparkling eyes, but as she breakfasted in her room she had to keep its contents to herself. She had given hints about Oliver's confidence to her, but she had not been much alone with Maurice since they reached Hawksby, and she had been anxious to improve any moments they had together by dwelling on the sad state of Miss Burrridge's health, and the conviction she felt that this unhappy young woman (she always spoke of Martha as "a young woman" or "a young person") was suffering from some organic disease. "A most unhealthy young person." She usually added to this a good deal of praise of Miss Burrridge with regard to strong-mindedness, economy, want of vanity,

and other qualities which she thought unattractive to Maurice, and she graciously added, "For those who admire a *rousse*, she is no doubt very handsome."

But since they reached Hawksby she and her son rarely met except in so large a party that there was no chance of any private talk. Maurice, however, always came to his mother's room for a few moments after breakfast, and she sat now waiting for him with Oliver's letter in her hand. He came in presently with a very sunny smile on his face.

One of the secrets of Lady Mary's fascination lay in her rapid perception of the moods of others; without giving herself the trouble of sympathizing deeply with either joy or sorrow, she would follow the lead she perceived just long enough to win confidence, and then would introduce her own topic without the slightest semblance of obtrusiveness, and succeed in drawing her listener entirely away from his own subject of thought, however engrossing, so fascinating was her sweet and playful manner of talking.

She listened while Maurice began to tell her of a riding-party arranged for the afternoon to visit some old abbey ruins, and, judging by her face and her animated smile, listened with so much interest that it would have been difficult to believe she was stifling a yawn of weariness.

“Will you go with us?” said Maurice. “I did not know you cared so much for ruins. I can easily drive you over—or there is, I fancy, a seat in Mrs. Maynard’s carriage. Most of the ladies go in the drag.”

His mother smiled.

“No, thank you, dear. I would not deprive you of your ride on any account, and I am sure to see plenty of Rachel Maynard this evening. Is Miss Dumbarton riding?” She said this carelessly, but a keen look in her eyes made Maurice smile; he was quite aware, spite of all her dexterity, that his mother had designs on this handsome heiress.

“Yes,” he said, “three out of our four young ladies are going to ride; but they will have four or five companions. I wish you would let me drive you.”

She patted his arm as he stood close beside her.

“You are always so kind to me, dear Maurice, so unselfish; but indeed I cannot go with you. I have so many letters to answer—among them a very special one from a friend of yours, too.”

She leaned back on her sofa and looked up at him, and then at the letter in her hand. She meant her look to express only playful mischief, but her heart was too full of triumph to keep it entirely from her eyes.

Maurice felt alienated, he scarcely understood his own feelings, but he had a dim consciousness that his mother was not in sympathy with him.

“Yes,” she went on, “I have news for you—it is not news to me, for I saw how matters were the last time I was at The Elms.”

Maurice felt the coming shadow; a chill passed over him.

“Have you heard from The Elms?” he said, in a dull, spiritless voice.

“No, dear; I have no correspondent at The Elms. I fancy I am not popular there. My correspondent is your friend, Mr. Burridge.”

She looked up at him, but he would not speak; he frowned with impatience. "You should try to guess," she laughed. "You won't? Well, our friend is engaged, and I suppose I need not say to whom."

"He might have written to me, I think," and then Maurice checked himself.

"Poor fellow," she went on, softly, "he is so happy; he says it is far more to him than the success of his work that he should have won so sweet a woman."

"I should think so," her son said, in a bitter tone.

"My dear boy, I fancied you thought no person or thing good enough for Mr. Burr ridge; but I am not sure that Miss Ralston is good enough. I have the highest opinion of him"—She wanted to spare him from reply.—"I think he has chosen the wrong sister, and I am a witch in these matters; the youngest girl is just the wife for a man who means to rise in the world; she is already far more alive to all the little duties of society than her sister will ever be; there is nothing eccentric about the youngest Miss Ralston."

“Poor Martha!”—Maurice was speaking to himself more than to his mother—“she will feel this; it will be hard to her to yield Oliver to anyone.”

He was not looking at his mother, or her startled face would have betrayed the fresh alarm she had taken.

“Poor Martha, indeed!” she said; “but hers will not be a long sorrow, dear, and it is partly because I am sure his sister will not be long spared to him that I am so rejoiced to hear of your friend’s engagement—he would so much miss his sister.”

Maurice stood thinking. He felt quite out of harmony with his mother.

“I am not so anxious about Martha as you are,” he said, coldly. “You are not used to her, that is all. What she did for Oliver was enough to make anyone pale and ill for a time.”

His mother felt uneasy; she was sure that Martha was really very ill, but it would be exasperating if the loss of Miss Ralston were to turn Maurice’s thoughts to this far more objectionable young woman.

“Can I send any message for you to Mr.

Burridge?" she said. "I feel so interested in this engagement, and it is so noble and disinterested in him, for I hear those Ralston girls have no money, and, of course, if he only waited a few years, he might marry anyone."

"I am not sure of that," said Maurice, doggedly.

His mother raised her eyebrows, and then she began to remember that he was her son, and that perhaps she ought to think of his feelings a little.

"You are glad for your friend, are you not, dear?" she said, sweetly. "Will you read the letter?"

"No; I am sorry." Then, feeling he must answer her look of surprise, "I don't think they are suited. You need not send any message for me," he said, turning away. "I am going to town in a day or two, and then I shall see Oliver."

"Oh, no, please, Maurice dear. Indeed, I cannot let you leave me here alone, and I have promised Rachel another week." She spoke fretfully.

Maurice shrugged his shoulders, and walked to the window. His mother looked after him; his manner was very strange this morning, and she was assailed by dim fears.

Was it possible that this quiet, reserved son of hers was so overset by the news she had given him, that he meditated some attempt at breaking off his friend's engagement?

She had all her life set herself against explanations and plain-speaking as low-class habits, and yet she could not resist an appeal now.

"Maurice," she said, timidly, "you will not say to Mr. Burridge that his engagement is a mistake."

He again shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear mother, is it likely?" and then he waited a few minutes in silence. Finding that his mother had no more to say, he nodded to her. "I must go now," he said, "Bob Maynard is waiting for me," and he went away.

His mother sat upright on her sofa, and clasped her hands together, while she thought.

"If that Dumbarton-girl had only a little

observation, Maurice is just in a mood to-day to be won; but then he needs tenderness and gentle sweetness, and very likely, instead of sympathising at all, she will challenge him to a race, or a leap, or something equally unsuitable. No, Miss Dumbarton is not wise; but then she is so very rich, and so very handsome, and she dresses perfectly, a girl to make a sensation wherever she goes—a girl I shall be proud to introduce as my daughter-in-law.”

She sat down to her writing-table, and wrote a charming reply to Oliver—it was a little gushing, perhaps, but, as she told herself while folding the letter, she had a mother’s heart, and no event in her son’s life had as yet been sufficiently stirring to call out the motherly emotion she expressed at Oliver’s happiness.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AT AWLFORD JUNCTION.

THERE is an immense amount of waste going on daily around us, a waste chiefly confined to the uneducated classes, or to those highly-cultured persons whose imaginations are always at work. It is extraordinary how much power of creation is wasted in inventing scenes and conversations which never occur—undreamed of motives and consequences which never enter the minds of the individuals supposed to be ready to enact them.

A wrong is done—something very slight, perhaps, and yet before the aggressor and the sufferer in the dispute or brawl meet again, how has this meeting and every word which will be said in it been rehearsed? And what happens?—usually the reverse of all that has been sup-

posed and suffered in this ideal fashion—something far less exhaustive, far simpler is said or done when the time really comes.

Some thoughts like these filled Oliver's head as he leaned forward and looked out of the window of the railway-carriage on his way to Awlford. There was not much to see—flat table-land, green meadows with large, over-fed elms rising now and then out of straight hawthorn hedges—no hints of a distant hill or town or river to break the monotony. Oliver looked overhead. The fleecy white clouds were lying lazily along a pale bluish ground, and had a family likeness to the fat elms below, there was so little form in them.

Oliver had counted the hours, between his interview with Gyneth on the terrace and his last night's visit to The Elms, he had amassed a store of ideas and feelings which were then to be communicated to his beloved—and what had happened? He had gone early, in the hope of a few words alone with her, but Gyneth had come down last of all while the gong was actually sounding for dinner;

then afterwards, though Mr. Venables did not at once follow him into the drawing-room, Gyneth kept close beside her aunt all the evening. Oliver fancied once that Mrs. Venables tried to rise and go away, so as to leave them together, and that Gyneth frustrated her aunt's movement.

At last he had no excuse for lingering; he held her hand in his when he said good-bye; he hoped she would, at least, have had the grace to come to the end of the long room with him to say a few words out of hearing of the others. But no; she drew her hand from his, but she seemed to understand him, for she walked with him towards the door. Then she stopped and gave him one of the sweet, bright smiles which made her face so full of a special charm.

"I will write to you," she said, "as soon as we reach Bemford—I will write and tell you how your sister is."

There was a slight tyranny in her manner, but her lovely glance intoxicated Oliver; he said, in a half reproachful way,

"Not till you get to Bemford!" and then

clasped her hand again ; he was just going to kiss it when Mr. Venables called out,

“ Stay a minute, Burridge, and I’ll walk part of the way with you ; I fancy there’s a moon.”

At this Louisa burst out laughing, and Gyneth drew her hand away.

Oliver had not a word to say as he and Mr. Venables walked towards the cottage in the silver light ; he thought his future uncle a tiresome, meddling old man, and wondered what Lady Mary found to like in him. That was one of the things he had forgotten to say to Gyneth ; he remembered it now as he sat in the railway-carriage—he meant to have shown her Lady Mary’s very charming letter of congratulation. It had not occurred to Oliver that there was no message in it from Maurice—not a hint that his friend knew of his engagement ; Love had already exercised over him its usual power of casting out all feeling but itself. The image of Gyneth had become so all-absorbing that there was no room in his heart for friendship or even for brotherly affection. He might have had an answer from Martha, but he never thought of

her—he could think of nothing but his love and of the time so near at hand he hoped—and what Oliver hoped he determined should be—when Gyneth would be no longer shy with him, but would give him back the love he was sure she could feel.

The sudden stoppage of the carriage roused him, and the fact that they had reached the junction where he must change for Awlford. Almost the first person he saw when he stepped on the platform was Maurice Penruddock, on his way from Awlford to London.

Oliver rushed up to him at once, so eager to speak that at first he was breathless. Maurice tried hard to return his greeting heartily, but he felt as if he would have given much to avoid this meeting.

“How is Martha?” He wanted to keep off the subject which he felt was on Oliver’s tongue as long as he could.

“Martha?—oh, she’s all right, I fancy.” But Oliver’s face was deeply red, for, as he spoke, Martha’s illness and his own sudden neglect of her came into his head.

“She’s at the sea, I suppose, or is she with you? I know nothing about her movements since we parted at Awlford.”

Oliver put his hand into his companion’s arm, and drew him away from a knot of people who were listening.

“Let us walk up and down,” he said; “I’ve got something to tell you, old fellow, though”—he looked quickly at Maurice—“perhaps Lady Mary has told you. I wrote to her.”

Maurice nodded and forced a smile, but his self-control was slipping away.

“Well, haven’t you a word of congratulation for me?” Oliver said, earnestly. “I’m the happiest fellow in the world; don’t you think I’m awfully lucky?”

Maurice had foreseen this interview, and he had also felt sure that Oliver would ask him this very question, and, with true waste of imagination, he had framed an answer which should at once imply sympathy with his friend, and yet warn him to be quite sure that he was in true sympathy with his future wife. Now that the question had been uttered, and he was face

to face with Oliver, Maurice's intended words were not forthcoming; he found himself saying instead, "Yes, you are very lucky; I wish you happiness."

The brightness faded out of Oliver's face, and he looked away from his friend; he felt thoroughly disappointed with his want of sympathy. If he had been less absorbed by his love, he might have cast about for a reason for Maurice's coldness; but it seemed to him impossible to give his attention to anything that did not directly relate to Gyneth.

"You will come down and see us at Bemford," he said, when they had walked up the platform again in silence. There was a little garden at this end, with some deep, cream-coloured hollyhocks, and a gorgeous sun-flower turning her orange disks so as to get the fulness of her god's rays.

Maurice was looking at the flowers as he answered—

"With pleasure. Are you going down soon?" He looked round at Oliver, and then he was sorry he had asked the question.

Oliver's face shone with happiness.

"Oh yes, I am going down as soon as I get through this business. They are all going down to Bemford—I mean the Venables party. You can fancy how jolly it will be ; it seems too good to be true. I feel like a boy when I think of it," he went on, bubbling over with unusual excitement, "and it will be good for poor old Martha too ; they go down very soon, and she and Gyneth Ralston are sure to get on together at the sea-side."

"Poor Martha !" Maurice said, he was too angry to say anything else.

Oliver looked up briskly.

"Well, I don't know—on the whole, I fancy she will be a gainer. She will see as much of me as ever, and she will gain a sister."

"I don't know," said Maurice ; "I fancy it must cost a sister a good deal to give up being first with a brother. How should you have felt if Martha had engaged herself?"

Oliver stared.

"There's no use in thinking how I should have felt ; I hope I should not have been such

a selfish brute as to wish the poor girl to give up her happiness for me." Then a thought struck him, and he looked hard at Maurice. "I should be delighted," he said, "to find that Martha was about to engage herself, and before I marry I mean to settle on her what I think she ought to have; then, if anything goes wrong with me, she is safe."

"Yes," said Maurice; he did not understand the direction Oliver's thoughts had taken—instead he smiled that a brother who had been so dearly loved could think that money would bring any comfort or healing to Martha's bereavement.

"You remember our old agreement," Oliver said; they were still standing near the hollyhocks. "You will be my best man, Penruddock."

A yet stronger feeling of anger and disgust swept over Maurice.

"I don't think so; I won't promise," he said. "Thank you for asking me, but I detest weddings; I should be a kill-joy on the occasion. You had better get some one with more go in him—a wedding is quite out of my line."

Oliver was deeply hurt. Instead of answering, he walked away. It was a relief to Maurice to hear a train approaching—it was the up-train—in another minute or so he should be free from his unwelcome companion.

But Oliver had moved out of sight, and, as the train rolled slowly away, Maurice could not see his face among the many gazers in the station.

Oliver had gone out into the yard behind, and was walking impatiently up and down across it.

“I could not have believed it,” he said; “of all the men I ever saw, he’s just the last to get spoiled and worldly. Is he jealous of my happiness? It may be so. Perhaps he cares for Martha, and does not feel in a position to marry; and yet—no, he could not care for Martha, he goes too much into society to care for such a shy creature, so unlike other women.” He walked up and down again, for the moment he was roused out of his love-dream, he could not bear to be baffled by anything he tried to make out. All at once his face cleared.

“ Yes, it’s that,” he said, and he looked compassionate. “ Poor Penruddock—poor old chap, I’m sorry for him, sorry in two ways. I thought he was larger-natured. He is jealous, I suppose. It must be hard, though, to see a fellow who is younger and hasn’t got your advantages of looks and manners stepping over your head in all ways. Well, never mind, I must try to be thankful. Yes, Oliver, you are an extremely lucky fellow, even if you do deserve it.”

CHAPTER XXXII.

A LOVE-LETTER.

THE engagement, of which Oliver felt so sure, had not brought any happiness to Gyneth. The more she thought over it, the more restless and silent she became. Mrs. Venables had again tried to draw her niece into confidence; but Gyneth avoided this so pointedly that day by day a reserve was establishing itself between these two who had loved so dearly.

Louisa had become her aunt's companion, and Gyneth spent her time almost alone.

She had only written once to Oliver—a stiff little letter, in which she told him she could not write about her feelings, as she did not understand them; at present, she feared, he would not be satisfied with them.

But Oliver did not seem vexed or rebuffed. He wrote to her very lovingly, assuring her that he could quite understand her feelings, that the truest love was always full of doubts and fears.

But Gyneth felt yet more dissatisfied. She had told both her aunt and Louisa that she was not engaged to Mr. Burrage; but Louisa would not accept this version of the interview, and teased her sister perpetually.

Gyneth's great trouble was caused by what she considered her unpardonable weakness in giving any hope to a man whom she felt sure she could never love.

"I," she said, "who had such exalted ideas of love, and was so shocked by Louisa's views about marriage; it is far worse of me to have done this than for a girl who holds the shallow notion that kindness and comfort are all that she will need in her home. I can like Mr. Burrage now—at least," she gave a slight shudder, "I did like him, but this would be so different," she got up, and walked about her room. "It will end in my hating him," she said; then she

stood still, and tried to look back calmly. The only excuse she could make for herself was that she had not listened to Oliver for the sake of her own happiness, but for his. "He took me by surprise," she said; "I had not time, or I must have felt sure then that—that—I had no love to give him, not the love he wants."

She threw herself into a chair near the window, her favourite thinking-nook, and again the question took the common-sense shape in which it had at first come before her. Could it be right to sacrifice Oliver's happiness—for she felt sure of the reality and strength of his love for her—to this shadow—this idea of a preference which she was ashamed to own to herself, and which she felt sure was not returned? The idea had never been fostered or cherished, it was always sternly banished as soon as it presented itself, but it would come back; and ever since her talk with Oliver beside the river it had become importunate, and the constant effort to banish it tried Gyneth deeply. She had to make this effort now, and to fix her thoughts earnestly on Oliver.

"Will it be for his happiness to marry me?"

she said. "I doubt it. He would not be satisfied with mere friendship, and I could not give him even that. I should feel a prisoner, full of locked-up thoughts I could never share with him. Long ago, even when first I knew him, my idea of love was fixed, and he could never have fulfilled it."

She started up; it would be better, more honest at once to write and say she had taken time enough to think, and that it was best to end this suspense; and she could say also that she did not wish to marry.

"He has not had time to get very fond of me," she said, hopefully, and then her sadness came back. The letter she had just received was full of happiness, expressed in warm, glowing words, from which she shrank shivering, for they seemed to turn her heart to ice while she read. She stood thinking. It seemed to her that Oliver had not believed her; he evidently thought he understood her feelings better than she did. "If I write," she said, "he is capable, in his impetuosity, of coming up to town at once to remonstrate, and I cannot again see him. He would not let me speak"—she shrank

as she remembered the power his strong will had always exercised over her;—"he is so masterful." Yes, she would wait till they were at a safer distance. At Bemford, too, she should see Martha, and she thought, indeed she felt almost sure, that she should ask Martha's advice how to deal with her brother. Martha would not ask questions, as Aunt Venables would; there would be no fear of self-betrayal to this shy recluse, who knew nothing about love, and yet Martha was such a devoted sister that Gyneth might gather from her how best to spare Mr. Burridge's feelings. It was at best a lame reason for her delay, and Gyneth felt this; but the dread of a scene and an explanation with Oliver conquered her impatience to be free from what she felt to be the greatest error of her life. "I shall see everything more clearly in a new light," she said; "I have so worried over it all in this room that I get confused as soon as I begin to think; I shall see how soon we can go to Bemford."

She went downstairs, and found her uncle and aunt and Louisa in Mr. Venables' study.

“Come along, Kitty, we just want you,” said Louisa. “You are not specially set on this dull Bemford, are you? I feel sure there’s nothing to be done there for anyone besides you and Mr. BurrIDGE, who, I suppose, will do moonlight walks on the sands, and early morning on the beach, and all the customary vagaries and imprudences of lovers; but I want a lively place. Cowes would be nice, I think.”

“Oh, please let us go to Bemford; I want to go there,”—and then Gyneth stopped. If she wanted to break with Mr. BurrIDGE, why seek the companionship of his sister? She could not tell; she could not in any way explain the strange fascination exercised over her by Martha, nor the feeling that at any cost she must justify herself to this shy, interesting woman.

“I want to go to Bemford, too,” said Mrs. Venables; “I like all I hear of it. If you find it too dull, Louy, you and your uncle will have to go to Cowes, and Kitty and I will stay behind.”

“Can we go this week?” Gyneth looked

so unusually sericus that her sister laughed.

“Poor Kitty! Love is making her a fidget,” she said.

It was soon arranged, Mr. Venables being as anxious for change as his niece was; so he and Gyneth decided to start next day for Ryde, and thence to see what was to be done in the way of housing themselves at Bemford.

By the time they reached Portsmouth, Gyneth felt as if she had shaken off her troubles. They had left London with a dull, heavy sky brooding over and obscuring everything, and here the quaint bit of town near the harbour was burning in the brilliant sunshine which gilded every salient angle of white wall or red roof till they stood out like metallic buildings against the intense blue overhead. The harbour and all along Spithead bristled with tall masts; there was to be a review next day, and the dark ironclads and turret-ships formed a splendid line, though all their rigging was closely furled. The white yachts were in brilliant contrast; they skimmed over the glittering water like gulls or butterflies—emblems

of pleasure and uselessness beside the dark, stern monster ships along the coast.

The sparkle and movement everywhere cheered Gyneth and diverted her thoughts; and now a bell began to ring, and she found herself in a line of people going on board a small steamer bound for Ryde. Everyone looked bright and smiling and pleasure-bound, as if no such thing as sorrow existed.

“After all,” Gyneth thought to herself, as she sat watching a row of happy faces opposite her, “my life has been like this till now; ever since we lost my dearest mother, I have only known sorrow or care through the sufferings of friends and poor people—they have kept me from being quite unreal, or I should have been no better than one of those white-sailed yachts yonder, which seem only made for sunshine.”

Even this sorrow which now oppressed her was more Mr. Burridge’s sorrow than hers; she was not called on to make any sacrifice, only to suffer remorse for the pain she must give.

But the old torment was coming back, and the old question, had she a right to give this

sorrow without trying whether she could love him? She got up from her seat and walked to the end of the steamer; there before her was the fair tree-girt island rising from the sea, looking like some enchanted land, with its tiny wooded bays and graceful line of coast. The beauty of the scene soothed Gyneth, and shed light into her troubled heart.

“No,” she said; “so far I know nothing of love, but I can imagine it, and it must be unlike anything else, nor can it be judged by anything but itself; it is not like a flower or a bird, or even a human being, there is no growth in it—I mean, so far as outward help relates to growth. No one can make himself or herself love—the germ of love, I think, must be like the poison of a fever; no one can exactly say how or why it comes—it is a sweet poison, but it is there, and, if it is true, it remains for ever.”

BOOK II.

AUTUMN.

CHAPTER I.

AT BEMFORD.

IT is a dull evening; the sea has changed from the many-tinted opal which characterised it through the day to a monotonous grey, against which the sails of the yachts and two forts in the line of coast opposite show out in white distinctness; the tide is going out, ebbing away with a soft, sad, sobbing, and there is only a narrow line of sea between the fort at the mouth of the harbour and the broad stretch of sands. On the left, across the bay, high up among the wooded hills opposite, a small white village nestles, and from this the trees slope down to a point that forms the extreme end of the bay into which the harbour opens; a white tower stands near the end of this point. Far-

ther on another long tongue of land, leafy down to the water's edge, stretches into the sea, at such a distance as to show that another bay lies between the two headlands, the farthest of which seems as if it might reach to the shipping on the opposite mainland. Across the broad stretch of grey sea, which, on the right, has no horizon of coast line, but spreads in a boundless breadth of water, a steamer goes lazily, a cloud of smoke flying in its wake like a black veil. Near the sands is a long purple line—a hidden shoal of sea-wrack—and this is bordered by rocks clothed in tawny bladder-weed; sands reach out to these and far beyond, but here and there long rocky ridges are projected into the dark line of water, breaking the waves and tempting adventurous seekers for zoophytes and other sea-treasures.

The sands are not yellow yet—they are still wet and glistening, covered in places with little coils, where the lug worms have been at work. Farther on, beyond the sand coils, the sea lingers in wrinkles left by the waves, and in these shallow pools swiftly-darting shrimps

flit to and fro like rays of light, transparent and seemingly impalpable. The sands are nearly deserted; a few bare-legged boys and girls still clamber among the rocks and stoop over the pools with their shrimping-nets, but the bright transparent atoms flash so swiftly through the water that they almost defy capture. Among the rocks, and on the sands too, are deeper pools, fringed with pale green weed, under which here and there a brown anemone glistens, clinging fast to a bit of rock that projects from the sand.

Above the sands a shingly beach rises, and this is crowned by the cliff, the sides of which are clothed by red-armed pine-trees. Behind the cliff lies the village of Bemford, a straggling collection of houses, and these follow the line the river-harbour takes on its way inland at a right angle to the pine-covered cliff which faces the sea. In the shingle, and stretching down on to the sands, are rows of piles at intervals, and these sometimes join the outstretching lines of rock, and help to break the strength of the incoming waves by forcing them into little

bays, so that at high water the sea at Bemford has a curving edge which adds much to its picturesque beauty. Just now the piles stand high and dry, and show how thickly they are fringed with yellow-brown tassels of bladder weed.

A woman was sitting on the farthest off of these rows of sun-bleached piles, her head turned away, looking seaward. She was dressed in black, and one long white hand played idly with the pebbles on the beach. She gathered up a handful and then flung them down beside her in a dull, spiritless way that told how mechanical her action was. All at once she turned round and showed Martha Burridge's remarkable face and deep luminous eyes, crowned with her ruddy wealth of hair; but the face was sadly changed from that of the Martha in the cottage at Fulham. There was the same power in it, but at Fulham the expression had been that of latent power—there was a storm of aroused passion in her white set face to-night.

“Why does not the sea tire?” she said, impatiently; “it has been going on at this for

thousands of years—every day, every day the same—called back just when it has reached the shore. Oh, how it must enjoy the freedom a tempest gives! how it must love to rage and lash the rocks as furiously as it wills!” Her eyes sparkled. “My life has been as monotonous as the sea’s life—but it has been worse. I have not had even the change of a storm. Well, I have got a change now,” she went on, after a pause; “since I have come down here I feel transformed. I sometimes think I must be going mad.”

She could not tell what it was that had so upset her former calm. Before Oliver’s illness, life used to be to her a level monotony; whatever of pleasure or pain it might hold for others, for her, she thought, it could only hold one acute sensation, and that would be the loss of Oliver or of his love.

As she looked back at the past, she rose, and began slowly to take her way along the sand, drying fast in the warm evening air. Looking back over these last months, it seemed to Martha that the change had begun before Oliver’s illness, that Gyneth Ralston had been

the beginning of this break up in the level of her life—for there was no monotony in it now, nor in the future, as she looked forward—only struggle and sorrow and bitterness. But almost while the thought came she smiled at her own self-deceit. No—she knew it well—she had never once been her old impassive self since the evening when Oliver had brought Maurice Penruddock to the Cottage.

“I was as stupid then,” she said, “as colourless as this dull sand. I could not feel sorrow, because I had never known joy. Well,”—she drew a deep breath,—“I have known joy now, and what does it do?—it destroys all the rest of life that has to go on without it.”

She walked on faster; her long narrow footprints marked a straight course along the sands; and, instead of taking the nearest way to the village by one of many paths which led from the shingle up the side of the pine-covered cliff, she walked beside the sea, as near the rocks as possible, so as not to have to climb the higher part of the breakwater stumps, so slippery with their tassels of tawny weed.

Yes, that evening had been the beginning, and after that had begun her growing jealousy of Miss Ralston with Oliver. And now looking back Martha felt that the news of Oliver's engagement, though it had brought a painful certainty, had yet given relief to another dread which, ever since she had seen Gyneth, had been a constant phantom beside her—the dread of an attachment between Maurice Penruddock and this girl. But if that dread was banished, and surely every law of reason or common sense ought to banish it—Martha told herself this when she found it starting up unbidden—why did not Maurice write to her? The joy of those hours spent together before Lady Mary's arrival, the joy of living in his loving presence which had been to her the fulness of happiness, had, as Martha truly said, destroyed her life. A black shadow fell on all that could not be shared with Maurice. He had parted from her so tenderly, and had been so solicitous for her comfort; for, when she started from Awlford, Oliver was still too much of an invalid to go with her to the station, so the

last face she saw was Maurice's, full of touching care for her. She had written, as he asked, to announce her safe arrival at Bemford, and he had answered her letter; but his answer had only made her crave for another letter, it had not satisfied her; there was not in it a line about himself, only anxious inquiries for her health and warm sympathy for her feelings in regard to Oliver's engagement; nothing to imply that he approved of this, or that he thought Oliver had made a good choice; nor even a hint that the writer meant to fulfil a promise he had made of coming to Bemford during her stay there. Martha's heart had ached as she read; she told herself she should never see him again. If the hope that had dawned on her at Awlford had been true, Maurice must have followed her to Bemford, he could not have kept away; and it was just when she was at hardest fight with this torturing doubt—the doubt of a heart in which the great magician Love has sprung up to his full height and strength—that she received Oliver's second burst of rapture on his engagement; for he told

Martha that, though she had not fully consented, he considered himself engaged to Gyneth Ralston; he was so sure, he said, that her scruples must yield before the warmth of the love he felt.

It was so hard, so bitter that such a love as Oliver's should be poured out on a girl who did not receive it thankfully; for, although of late years he had become far less outwardly demonstrative, Martha knew how warm her brother's heart was, and she remembered the passionate affection of his childhood. It was impossible, she thought, for Miss Ralston not to love Oliver, unless she loved some one else.

"And then she would not have accepted Oliver, unless she is worldly. I suppose he is what is called a good match."

Still this idea did not accord with all Oliver had told her of Miss Ralston; he had said she was so good, so religious.

Martha's lip curled.

"I never believe in the thoroughness of your religious church people," she said; "they have a way of hiding their motives and calling them

by different names. I remember the vicar's wife at Deeping used to give her gowns away to some poor ladies she knew, before the clothes were half worn out, she had new ones for herself, and she called it 'charity.' I should have thought charity would have worn the old gown and have given the new one away."

She went on, looking straight before her, but seeing nothing clearly except the projecting slope of land beyond the harbour, crowned by its little nestling village, which was growing darker and more solid-looking against the sky, and the tall ruined tower at its extreme point, yet more white and spectral than it had looked in daylight. But now she was driven upward on to the shingle, and its increasing roughness forced her to take more heed. She had not gone this way before, and she found she should have to clamber up a waste of beach, with tufts of rusty dock and wild mignonette growing in nooks among the stones, to reach the entrance of the village, where she had promised to do some shopping for Jane.

But she had already been out far later than

usual, and she knew her old servant would be anxious ; so, though the way through the village and then home across fields would have been the shortest, her strength had so far failed her that she shrank from climbing up to the top of the steep rough shingle, and, turning back, she took her way along the sands again beneath the pine-covered cliff. As she went on, the cliff became lower, till soon it was not more than six feet high, a broken yellow ridge, from which the earth had recently slipped, for on the shingle below it were knolls here and there, with thistles and huge plants of golden rag-wort, enjoying life quite as much as if they were still a part of the flowery jungle that made the side of the cliffs above them a tangle of wild blossoms. Here and there a thistle rose from the bottom, till it was high above the edge of the cliff, making, with the teasles and rag-wort and white parsley blossoms, a brilliant hedge, to the little footpath that skirted the golden cornfield overhead.

But as Martha drew near Foreland, as the point beyond Bemford was called, the flowers

grew scantier, and the banks lower still; while the beach was strewn with large orange-coloured slabs of stone, closely imbedded in sand and shingle. The line of opposite coast was no longer visible—wide open sea stretched before her; though off the Point itself was a line of black fishing-boats, and far away beyond these the white sails of a yacht caught the last gleams of evening light.

It was a lovely scene, and Martha started when she came upon the white-ribbed skeleton of a French ship lost off the Foreland many years ago, its bare timbers sticking upright in ghastly whiteness from the sand—it might have been the relics of some antediluvian creature. She had passed it by in the morning with little heed, but now she stood still, gazing—the weird wreck seemed to have a message for her. But Martha was a changed woman; her thoughts centred on herself now as they had never done in the old days at Deeping. As she looked at the decaying sea-bleached ribs, still whiter and more weird against the fast darkening sea, she felt no pity for those who had perished with

their ship on this rocky point; no sympathy for the heart-breaks caused by sundered lives and by bereavement and broken fortunes. She only said to herself, "No one cares for me; no one will grieve if I too leave my bones in this out-of-the-way village—who knows but that I shall do so?—no one will care but Jane——"

She went on more quickly, for the wind was rising and a fresh air blew towards her from the end of the Point. There was a coastguard station here, with a flagstaff and a life-boat. A tiny stream found its trickling way to the sea between blocks of stone, and a little bridge led across this to a road which ran up inland, but from which, across fields, was a way to Bemford. Near the bridge, on some rude steps made among the stones, a boy and girl were filling a can and a pail, laughing and teasing one another. From the bridge a line of lobster-pots showed like dark specks in the water, and a range of them lay on the beach drying and at rest. Two or three cottages, covered with roses and myrtles, stood beside the little stream; but Martha passed these by

when she had nodded to the boy, and crossed the bridge; she went up the road till she reached a little gate on the right, almost hidden by an overgrown hedge of bay and white-blossomed laurustinus. Jane had chosen this out-of-the-way cottage for her mistress in preference to a lodging in Bemford itself.

“I knew, miss, you wouldn’t abide other lodgers in the house, or to be stared at when you went out,” the prudent woman said; “and I don’t see how anyone can stare over these thick hedges.”

It was indeed a wonderfully secluded place; the path from the gate wound through a neglected shrubbery, now a thicket of bays and myrtles, dazzling with an abundance of tasselled flowers; beside them were rosy hydrangeas and huge crimson fuschia-trees, and between the cottage and the top of the low cliff was only a strip of meadow, so that, as Jane said, “there could be nothing but sea-gulls in front, and one could almost step down into the sea from one’s bedroom window.”

The seclusion and completeness of the little

dwelling had pleased Martha extremely ; and it was convenient enough, for they could supply almost all their requirements from a large farmhouse which lay a little more inland.

There was a vegetable garden belonging to the cottage, and its owner, short, stout Mrs. Jones, who walked about in huge leather boots which she never attempted to lace up the front, owned more than one of the fishing-boats, and would always let her lodgers have as much fish as they chose. The beds, it is true, were hard, and household comforts were scarce ; but Martha liked the quiet retreat far better than the more pretentious cottage in the lane at Fulham.

As she drew near the gate, she saw Jane standing there, her blue eyes and round mouth opened anxiously.

“I thought something had happened, miss,”—she spoke in a matter-of-fact, level voice,—“and I was coming out to look for you. Tea’s been ready this hour and more.”

But Jane had lived with her mistress ever since she was a child, and as she looked at her her voice softened. She thought Miss Martha

was paler than ever, and she felt more than ever sure that it had been a great pity to come so far and get no good by it.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE SANDS.

MR. VENABLES was very skilful in all things that require method and foresight, and he had that sort of instinctive readiness of judgment which has far more to do with getting on in the world than actual talent has. He told Gyneth at once that there was only one cottage in Bemford that would suit them, and if he could not get that he should not stay in the village. The owner of the cottage had not thought of letting his house this autumn, but Mr. Venables at once offered so tempting a price that the offer was accepted by the village agent, and the owner, an eccentric bachelor, consented at once to retire with his dogs to the mainland.

Three days after their arrival at Ryde, Gyneth found herself installed at Bemford in a charming cottage surrounded by a garden, and this was fenced off from a broad avenue of acacias, which led from the church beside the harbour to the tree-covered headland at its mouth, and made a distinctive feature of the little village. Here on Sunday afternoons lovers loitered under the cool shade of the acacias, for the feathery foliage, crossing and re-crossing overhead, made a depressed arch of greenery. Beside the carriage-drive along the avenue were grassed alleys, bordered by the sometimes fence, sometimes hedge which screened the pleasant gardens of one or two other houses from observation.

Gyneth had inquired for Miss BurrIDGE on her arrival, and had learned that she lived out at Foreland, some way further along the coast, but that she spent much of her time on the sands; so she resolved to meet her there next morning.

Her uncle had gone down to bathe, and had not returned when Gyneth started on her walk. The avenue looked lovely this morning; the sun was not shining, and there was abundance

of shadow beneath the arch of feathery leafage overhead, and at the end of this leafy bower was the sea, intensely green in the paler green frame made by the acacia boughs.

When Gyneth reached the Point on which the avenue ended, she found that the cliff was at some considerable height above the beach. On the left a path was cut on its gravel side, which descended gradually at some distance to the shingle. The top of the cliff was crowned with trees, and its side clothed with brambles, and gay with huge plants of golden rag-wort, while below the path it went down grassed to the beach itself, tangled with a luxuriant growth of yellow gorse and broom, of rosy curds and cream, and tall white nosegays of cow-parsnips. These, as they neared the shingle, became confused in a flowery mass, bordered by the rusty-red of green-leaved dockweed. Gyneth went on, full of keen enjoyment, catching glimpses of the sea now and then, till she found herself in the hanging wood of red-stemmed pine-trees, their foliage in blue-green tufts against the background of emerald sea. The cliff on the right

was hidden now ; the trees formed a thick wood reaching high above her ; but on the left the sea shone grandly through the pine-trees thrown into fantastic shapes by the wind, and bent forward from the cliff side, so as to cast a pleasant shadow on the beach below, while they gave out a delicious resinous fragrance.

The path Gyneth had followed went on for some distance further through the pine-trees, sloping gradually downwards till it reached the beach ; but she turned out of it into a shorter, steeper way on the left, and hurried down this shorter way expecting to reach the sea. She stood still near the bottom of the descent, under a pine which, bent forward from the cliff by the violent wind, hung over a wilderness of tall pink agrimony, willow-herb, and nettles ; with an undergrowth of feathered maretail and stately teasles rising up royally here and there, as if to rebuke the luxuriance around by their severe simplicity. Through the red pine-arms the sky showed full of snowy mountain-like clouds ; above these, tiny rifts of blue,

like horizontal lancets, came rarely, while higher yet, and quite overhead, through the spaces in the blue-green pine needles, a grey expanse was spread, so feathery that it seemed as though a puff of wind might send it floating over the sea.

It was high tide, and the water, greyer near the shore than it looked from the avenue, seemed boiling below, for every now and then it rose up, and, not curling into a wave till it reached its limit, fell on the shingle with an angry murmur, a subdued growl, like far off thunder. It was not an ordinary grey sea, a sort of luminous green tinted it, and long sweeps of purple showed when some heavier cloud detached itself from the feathery mass overhead. The fort stood out a brilliant white, girt no longer with sands, but with the sea dashing against it, and circled with dark fishing-boats and white-sailed yachts. Every now and then came a hoarse cry, as a sea-gull skimmed across the water so low as almost to touch the waves. The air was warm, and yet it seemed to Gyneth that there was a shiver in the scene, and a strange

heart-stirring sob among the pine-trees as the wind moved their branches.

There is no sand to walk on now, and, tired of making her way over the shingle, she sits down to rest under a pine-tree, with the sea almost at her feet. She may soon meet Martha, and what is she going to say to her?

The beach is busy with bare-legged children, paddling for the fresh seaweed and shells brought up by the tide, and every now and then rushing away from some larger wave which threatens to give them a bath. A bright scarlet petticoat shows out in vivid relief against the luminous green of the sea. Every now and then a nurse and two or three little children come along the beach, the nurse carrying a bundle of towels and bathing-gowns; and farther on Gyneth sees a little striped tent fixed high and dry on the beach, with a path of tawny seaweed stretching over the shingle to the water.

“When Louisa comes, we will bathe,” she says; “there must be plenty of shelter round that next curve of the shore.”

She gets up and walks on under the pine-

trees, keeping along a sort of path at the foot of the cliff, so that she can see the beach, and yet is herself in partial shadow.

Very soon she recognizes Martha in the distance, coming slowly along, her eyes fixed on the sea; she is very pale, and yet Gyneth thinks how noble she looks—her head so well set, and such an undefinable air both of power and of repose about her whole figure.

Gyneth's heart swells as she watches her.

"No wonder I have so longed to know more of her," she says; "she is not like anyone I ever saw; so superior to ordinary girls. I have never had a friend of my own age, and I feel that she is just the friend I want. I am sure she will tell me the truth."

She has now reached a part of the cliff where some private grounds stretch down to the edge of the shingle, and she has perforce to leave the walk beneath the pine-trees. The noise of her footsteps as she comes down the stony ridge of beach rouses Martha, and she gives a start of recognition.

"I sent you a note last night, and I

came out to find you." Gyneth smiles so sweetly that Martha's prejudice against her softens. "I heard you lived beyond the lower Point."

"At Foreland;" Martha is just going to add, "it is too much trouble for you to think of calling on me, Miss Ralston," and then she suddenly remembers that this girl is to be her sister and Oliver's wife—for his sake she must be sociable.

"Oliver's wife!" She scarcely hears Gyneth say—"Shall we go on to your cottage. I hear it is very pretty." She is so absorbed in the thought that this mere stranger is already more to Oliver than she has ever been; she turns unconsciously to walk beside her companion.

"I hope you are really better for the change," Gyneth is saying, affectionately; "I scarcely know whether you find it dull to be alone here; people are so different about being alone."

"I am always alone," Martha smiles; but Gyneth thinks she looks cold. "I am more used to my own company than to other people's."

They walk on a little way in silence. Gyneth feels rebuffed.

“I like being alone sometimes,” she says, simply; “but I believe by nature I am sociable, and I care to hear the ideas of other people, even when I can’t always agree with them.”

Martha fixes her eyes earnestly upon her; she feels she must say something, yet she is too shy to say what she supposes is expected of her.

“Do you always agree with Oliver,” she says, bluntly. Gyneth’s cheeks tingle; Martha’s earnest gaze is searching her hidden feelings. It seems to her that at present she is in a false position with Oliver’s sister, and that she ought to tell her the truth as soon as possible.

“No,” she says, “I am afraid I do not always agree with him.”

“Why afraid,”—Martha speaks less coldly—“I suppose every woman has a right to her opinions. When two people love one another, it does not follow that they must think exactly alike.”

Gyneth looks up in surprise; what has happened, she asks herself, to change Martha so much? At Fulham, Martha looked on her as a superior,

and now, it seems to Gyneth, that she takes the tone of an older, more experienced person; perhaps Miss Burridge thinks of her already as a younger sister.

“Your brother has written to you about me?” she says, timidly. She begins to guess at Martha’s jealousy of her. It is so natural that she should be jealous, Gyneth thinks; but she must set that question at rest, so that no bar may exist between her and the friendship she longs to win.

“Yes, he told me he was engaged to you.” Martha looks straight before her.

They had reached the flat orange-coloured stones beneath the lowered cliff, and were far out of sight of the paddling children, or the bathers.

Gyneth stops. “Shall we sit down a few minutes,” she says, gently. “I want to talk to you.”

A distrustful look dawns in Martha’s eyes; then, as they fix on the sweet face beside her, the look wavers, grows more and more timid, till finally it sinks on to the stones at her feet.

“Yes, if you please,” and she sits down, noting as she does so her own stiff posture, as she thinks, and the rare grace with which Gyneth makes a kind of sofa of the huge orange-coloured stone. Martha has gone back to her first opinion of Miss Ralston. She is artificial, she thinks; she has come to meet her this morning because she is now alone at Bemford and she wants a companion; she is going to marry Oliver because he is a good match. Martha hardens herself against the sweet face and charming manner which touched her just now.

“I am sorry,” says Gyneth, “that your brother told you I was engaged to him; he was too hasty. I must explain this to you, please. He asked me to love him, and I said I would try to do so—and—and I am afraid—I mean, I think he has made a mistake; he is so good that he ought to marry some one who loves him very much indeed.”

Martha’s eyes open widely; it seems as if a gleam of green gold darts from them on to Gyneth’s unconscious downcast face; for, though she can no longer dislike Miss Ralston for her

worldliness, she feels it an affront that she does not love Oliver, and a bright flash of colour spreads over her face.

“You are hasty, you cannot tell whether you love my brother,” she says, coldly. “You have not yet seen enough of one another. Oliver has perhaps been too sudden ; if he had waited, your love would have been more ready for his. When you see him again, Miss Ralston, you will think differently.”

She speaks in a hurried jerky way, but the opposition in her voice rouses Gyneth.

“Oh no—no, indeed. I am not acting hastily ; I have thought it over ever since, and I seem to shrink from him. I used to like him so much ; it is surely better to end it at once than to let him go on in a false hope. He cannot love me so very much yet.”

Martha looks at her ; her lip curls with scorn.

“He loves you so very much that he thinks of no one else ; his life and his happiness are bound up in you, Miss Ralston, whatever you may choose to think. Why, he has always loved you ; ever since he first saw you he has

thought of nothing but you, talked of no one else. Why"—her anger, at what she considers Gyneth's treachery, carries her out of all reticence—"I hated your very name long before I saw you."

Gyneth is pale. No one has ever spoken to her in this violent fashion. She does not know how to answer.

"I did not guess this," she says, "but you may be mistaken too; I hope you are. Do you think it was more than friendly liking that he felt for me?"

"Liking!" Martha's eyes glow, and she is pale again, but her voice is full of earnestness. "Liking and love are different things, Miss Ralston. In a man like Oliver there are no sham feelings. Liking does not grow into love in a true man's heart—though of course liking may be hatched into the thing called love by some people. True love, like Oliver's, comes at once. I don't mean to say he *knew* he loved you at once," she says, abruptly.

"Well then"—Gyneth feels impatient—"you say yourself that liking will not grow into

love; so you agree with me, why should I wait to decide. I have only liking for your brother."

Martha looks earnestly at her; the impatience in Gyneth's voice has brought this girl nearer her own level, and has torn away the little veils which conventionality and Martha's own shyness set between them.

"I do not mean that. I mean that you may have more than liking, though you don't know it. You may love Oliver; but your love hides itself from you, as it would not do if you were less sure of him. Oh, if you feared that his love was given to some one else, you would soon know the truth, you would feel that life was worth nothing to you without him."

She speaks with passion, and now she stops suddenly; her face is deeply red; she is frightened at this revelation of her own feelings. Before Gyneth can answer, Martha has shrunk back into her shyness. Gyneth shakes her head—she is too much absorbed in her own feelings just now to heed Martha's.

"I have put that very test to myself, and I felt that it would be a relief to hear that your

brother loves some one else. I have found myself wishing this."

Martha looks at her with angry eyes; she thinks this girl is not worthy of Oliver, but, if he wishes for such a cold, pretty piece of gracefulness, she must consent to marry him. It is possible that Miss Ralston cannot feel deeply.

"You must wait," Martha says, coldly. "I do not say that the consciousness of love comes quickly to all alike. I only say that, when it does come, it comes at once; it is often misunderstood, it is called regard, and friendship, and so on, till the wakening comes. You love my brother, Miss Ralston, and if you are patient you will know it."

Gyneth rises up from the stone. She is very sad and perplexed; Martha has spoken with a power that impresses her, and that for the time hinders reflection, or she might wonder where this shy recluse has picked up knowledge which sounds so true. It is a relief to hear herself hailed, and to see Mr. Venables looking down on them from the cliff only a few feet above their heads.

“Good morning,” he says, taking off his hat, and, with the admiration of a small man for a tall woman, he scans Martha’s well-developed figure. “I hope you have good news from Oliver, Miss Burridge. When do you expect him down?”

CHAPTER III.

MARTHA AT FAULT.

MR. VENABLES chatted to Martha all the way to her cottage, and when he reached it he declared he must go over it. After examining it from kitchen to bed-rooms, he professed himself delighted with its quaint seclusion and splendid sea-view.

“I should not have thought there was nearly so much room in it,” he said. “It would be worth while to buy it, and furnish it, for a little sea-side nest, to run down to when one wants a change.”

Martha smiled; this brisk, chatty, cheerful gentleman amused her; and, while she listened to his pleasant flow of talk, she thought how

entirely his suggested improvements would destroy the special charm of this flowery wilderness, a charm like the perfume of a wild-flower or the tangle of blossoms along the cliff-side. She noticed Gyneth's silence, but she did not try to disturb it; she felt that she must think over their talk before she knew her own feelings towards Oliver's love.

She longed to be alone, but Mr. Venables lingered for more than an hour. He gave her advice about the pruning of the vines, which screened the back of the cottage as closely as roses and myrtles and fuschias tapestried its front; he admired everything, even to the rosy way-wind flowers that gleamed like stars on the grass beneath the hedges, and in the hedges themselves; and, as to the myrtles, he asked Miss Burrridge's leave, and then cut a nosegay of tasselled creamy blossoms, and presented them to Gyneth.

"The blossoms are finer out here than anywhere else," he said; "and you will want to make the rooms gay for your aunt and Louy. I have telegraphed to them to come to-morrow."

Martha was looking at Gyneth, and she saw with surprise that the girl did not smile; she fancied that she looked more grieved than glad at this prospect of companions. She wished more than ever that Mr. Venables would go; she wanted to think over so many things. But he was in no hurry. He examined the bit of meadow, and told Martha that a good croquet-lawn might be made thereon with very little expense.

At last he said it was time to depart; but even after this he lingered, praising the fuschias and a huge hydrangea that took its place among the other shrubs as if it was quite at home among evergreens. Mr. Venables talked all the way to the gate, getting very little response from either of his companions. There is no saying how much longer he would have stayed, for, as he told his niece afterwards, he was bent on drawing out this dumb, handsome creature into conversation. But at the gate he spied Mrs. Jones, in her unlaced boots, with an enormous lobster in her hand.

Mr. Venables was a thorough cockney in

his love for hunting up characters, and Mrs. Jones looked altogether so full of promise that he said good-bye very hurriedly to Miss Burridge, and hastened in pursuit of the stout lobster-seller.

Gyneth turned and held out her hand to Martha.

"I must talk to you again," she said. "You have made me still more unhappy than I was. I may come again, may I not. We had not nearly finished our talk, you will let me come."

"Yes, if you like;" then Martha added, less abruptly, "remember, Oliver's happiness is bound up in you."

Gyneth did not answer; she hurried after her uncle along the road bordered by a carpet of "way-wind."

Martha gave a sigh of relief. She went back to the cottage, and upstairs into the little bow-window drawing-room that looked on the sea.

And now that she had full liberty to think, she waited and let the time slip by. She took up a book that lay on the little table in the

window, but she could not fix her thoughts on it; then she put it down and looked out over the sea.

She gave herself up to the self-rebuke which she felt within her heart. She had done quite wrongly with this girl. She would have served Oliver far more truly if she had encouraged Miss Ralston to give him up; and yet she knew that Oliver longed for Gyneth's love with all the strength of his nature, and it was terrible to Martha that he should not be happy in his own way.

"He is so constant," she said, "so tenacious, he will not love again easily—what am I talking of," she flung herself down on the little sofa wearily. "How can people love twice; surely the heart must break in tearing itself away; it could never cling to a second love."

Her own indecision tormented Martha. Like all people who live much alone, she had held the theory that there must be one right and one wrong to everything. It did not occur to her that it was possible for two persons to be in the right, and yet to differ on the

same subject. She could not therefore understand the division in her mind. One moment she wanted to be sure that Gyneth would marry Oliver, and then she recoiled from the idea of Oliver married to a girl who only half loved him.

All at once the thought came, did Miss Ralston love some one else? At this Martha rose from the sofa, and spite of her fatigue she began to pace the room. No, this was unlikely. Gyneth's confession of her want of love showed that she was at any rate unworldly; it was therefore quite improbable, Martha thought, that she would have listened to Oliver at all, if she had a previous attachment. After all, if he were satisfied with this kind of half-love, he was the person to be consulted; and yet Martha could not give up her right of judgment. Oliver, she argued, had always been looked up to in his own home as a superior being; he was looked up to by all with whom he had had dealings; it was not likely that he could be happy without this devotion in his wife, it was not fitting that a man—Martha

held her head up proudly—so highly gifted, and so fitted to rule as Oliver was, should have to seek the love of his wife, instead of having it lavished on him.

“And yet,” she said, “I read in a French book once, that love is never equal between two people. One always loves more than the other does; well, then, the most loving should be the woman, she is the inferior, so she ought to give the most.”

Whichever way she considered it, it seemed to her that Miss Ralston was not fit for Oliver. Her unworldliness, even, was against her in such a marriage. A more ambitious girl would be proud of her husband’s successful qualities, and would feel sympathy in his pursuits; but this girl, if she married without love, would pine and—Martha gave a sudden start, and her face grew whiter still; as she stood in the middle of the little room, she remembered Fuller’s axiom: persons who marry without love, are pretty sure to love where they do not marry.

“It might be so,” she said, sternly; “there is

no law against love, no safe-guard will shut love out of a heart that has never known him. I believe the only safe-guard a married woman can have against future misery, is to love her husband truly before she marries him. If this girl marries Oliver without love, she will love some one else some day."

Martha considered that she had a very mean opinion of herself, and yet she was as contemptuous at her own changeableness as if she had till now been infallible. For now she found herself actually longing that Gyneth would love Oliver. She knew too well what love was to hope that he would ever come back to her the brother of her youth; if he did not win Gyneth, he would be soured, disappointed, all the freshness would be dried out of his life.

"I might have felt this sooner," she said, reproachfully. "I have shown him so little sympathy because I hoped it might never be; and now"—she put one hand up to her aching forehead—"what has changed me so about it all? Oh, how hatefully selfish I have

been, not to have put Oliver's happiness before my own."

She did not realise it, but, almost for the first time since he had begun life, Martha was in outward sympathy with her brother. His life hitherto had been in bright sunshine, and hers in pale cold shadow; her love, even, the one jewel of her life, had seemed hopeless, and now what was his? Even if Gyneth repented her coldness, and tried to keep her engagement, it seemed to Martha that her feelings would not be worth the name of love. Such a man as Oliver must surely inspire at once a decided attachment; a feeling that had to be coaxed into existence was not worthy of him.

Jane came into the room with a letter.

"Here's a letter, miss; the post doesn't come here regular. Mrs. Jones brings the letters, and she went to the village late to-day."

Martha took the letter listlessly. She feared it was from Oliver, and that it would be full of eager questions about Gyneth; how should she be able to answer them? But, as she looked at the address, a flush rose and spread over her

face, and a soft sweetness shone out of her troubled eyes.

Open-eyed, round-mouthed Jane, that placidest of maidens, gave a slight start at the change in her mistress's face. She did not know whom the letter was from, except that certainly it was not from Mr. Oliver. It was seldom that a new idea forced its way into the monotony and self-complacency of Jane's brain, but she had got a new idea now. She looked at Martha with a stare of wonder, as she might have looked if her mistress had turned a summersault, or performed some acrobatic feat, and she quietly resolved that she would find out who wrote that letter.

"It ain't a woman's hand-writing neither," she said.

Martha walked to the window, and turned her back on Jane before she opened her letter. She was not conscious of her tell-tale face, but she felt that she must be quite alone to enjoy the dear delight of this reading.

It was a very short letter from Mr. Penraddock.

Maurice asked after her health, he spoke again of Oliver's engagement, and of Martha's own feelings about it.

"It must be a trial to so loving a sister as you are," he said, "to give up your brother to anyone. I wish I could go down to see you, but circumstances have made this at present impossible."

CHAPTER IV

AT THE VILLAGE POST-OFFICE.

IT is certainly true that, however strong a prejudice may exist between two people, yet, if there be truth and single-mindedness in each, however great the difference of manner, which has perhaps been the chief agent in the prejudice, in the end trust must ensue, and in some cases friendship will follow trust.

On the second day after Gyneth's visit, Jane requested her mistress to make some purchases for the house, and Martha, much against her will, found herself obliged to go into the village. She resolved to go early, and to take the way across the fields, so as to avoid any chance meetings ; the morning being the favourite time for the

beach and the sands, she hoped to find the village empty of any visitors.

The sky was without a cloud, and the morning full of brilliant sunshine. Martha had felt brighter and happier since she had heard again from Maurice. He must think of her sometimes, or he would not trouble to write—perhaps, when Oliver came down, he might bring his friend with him; and so, comforted by that precious word, “perhaps,” she started on her walk this bright morning with a heart so far lightened that she enjoyed the sunshine, and the exquisite tricks of light and shade it created among the wild flowers as she took her way across the fields. A letter from Oliver that morning had helped to cheer her; she even paused to listen to the creak-creak of the grasshopper in the barley-field—the beautiful golden barley, “hanging down its head”—and when she reached a broad stretch of clover, she was full of admiration for the glorious moving troop of butterflies spread over its surface—the rich brown and scarlet and blue of the Red Admiral, as he flew from

blossom to blossom, or the grand purple of the Peacock, as he sat fanning his splendid wings ; now a large white, and then two yellows, golden in the sunshine, flew high above the rest, while innumerable blues and browns mingled with their more vividly splendid fellows, and made a harmony of the moving mass.

The way through the clover-field had led her farther from the sea, and now, as she passed a small cottage, a break among the slender trees showed her the blue line of water beyond a stretch of meadow ; a flock of geese were scattered over this, and a tiny smoke-wreath showed there was life in the cottage—all else was in still, beautiful repose, except that across the sea-line a white-sailed yacht moved lazily, looking scarcely bigger than one of the geese on the grass.

Martha drew a deep breath of enjoyment. She had not much perception of mere picturesque beauty ; the pine-wood on the cliff, with its infinite variety of form and colour, would not have touched her as it had touched Gyneth, but this scene, full of a large repose, with only

the green of the trees and the blue sea in its far-off grandeur, filled Martha's heart with a calm that seemed to her like heaven. She stayed some minutes gazing, and then went on her way, feeling more serene, more free from inward torment, than she had done since she reached Bemford.

The path she took led her at last to the end of a green lane; at the other end was the church, and a turning in the middle led to the post-office and the few scattered shops of the village. Martha had business at the post-office, where stamps and stationery were sold, with cakes and cheese, bacon and drugs, although these last were restricted to Cockle's pills and spirits of camphor—an indication, perhaps, of the healthy condition of the village.

At the shop door she met Mr. Venables. He came out suddenly, or she would have avoided the meeting; but he shook her hand heartily, and kept it in his own.

"Kitty," he called over his shoulder, "here's Miss Burridge."

Martha struggled not to be shy, but

when Gyneth came out, followed by a taller girl, who, to Martha's terrified eyes, looked alarmingly fashionable, she wished herself behind the hedge. While she shook hands, Gyneth introduced her sister, but Martha's stiff nod did not impress Louisa favourably, and she acknowledged it by a stately courtesy.

"We are all coming to see you very soon," Mr. Venables said, "but my wife can't walk far yet; she's delicate, and there's no way of getting about in a carriage, unless you go inland—no carriages, either."

"The place is quite too primitive," said Louisa—"don't you think so, Miss Burridge?"

"No, I do not, I like quiet;" then Martha looked for the first time in her questioner's face and saw an amused smile on Louisa's rosy lips, and mischief in her bright blue eyes.

"I am glad Oliver did not choose this one," she thought, and involuntarily she felt a clinging to Gyneth.

"Won't you come in and see my wife?" said Mr. Venables. "She will think it very kind of you."

Martha's cheeks grew rosy. "No, thank you," she said, abruptly. "I cannot this morning. I have to go home. I am in a hurry, thank you."

Gyneth came a little forward.

"You have some shopping to do, have you not?" she said, kindly. "We will wait outside for you, and then you will come on with us and rest for five minutes, will you not? My aunt would like to see you."

Martha tried to harden herself against the girl's winning sweetness, and then the thought of Oliver helped her.

"I am really not worth so much trouble," she said, smiling. "But I must not stay long; pray don't wait for me; I can catch you up."

She went hurriedly into the shop. Louisa scarcely waited till she was out of hearing.

"Why, Kitty," she said, "you never said she was so handsome—if she only had different hair, she would be beautiful."

"For once, I don't agree with you, Louy," her uncle said. "I call Miss Burrridge's hair beautiful."

"The natural way in which it clusters over

her forehead is charming," Louisa said. "But it is such an intense red; no wonder she looks pale."

Gyneth smiled at her uncle.

"I am so glad you admire her hair," she said. "It seems to me so very remarkable. As she stood in the full light the other day, it was a red-brown, more like a horse-chestnut, and to-day, it looked purple and crimson, too. I wish I could paint that hair; but, indeed," she said, unconscious of Louisa's amused smile, "I wish I could paint her whole face—her eyes are so very beautiful, green-gold, and sometimes they look black when the pupils dilate."

Louisa laughed out.

"We make allowances, dear," she said. "We remember whose sister she is;" then, seeing Gyneth frown and turn away, she went on, "but I must see if your beautiful statue won't speak. She looks so extremely refined and dignified that I fancy she must be worth listening to—is she? or is it only outside, for, I believe, there are a good many handsome shams going about the world."

“She is most interesting when she is not shy; but please don’t go on talking about her till she comes out of the shop. It is quite impossible for you, Louy, to guess even how she suffers from shyness.”

Gyneth spoke hurriedly. She had not much faith in her sister’s consideration for the feelings of others, and she felt towards Martha as one feels towards a wild, half-tamed bird, whom the slightest alarm will frighten into flight.

They were all silent when Martha came out. She was slightly flushed, and Louisa thought, if she were only properly dressed, and a little more conscious of her own beauty, that she would be one of the most remarkable women she had ever seen. And, although Louisa Ralston was only eighteen, she was firmly persuaded that she had considerable experience, both of this world and of the people who inhabited it.

She placed herself at once by Martha’s side, and Mr. Venables and Gyneth followed.

“Then you really like dull places,” Louisa began.

Martha gave her a sidelong look, full of suspicion, and Louisa decided that the eyes were really green-gold; and, also, cat-like in expression.

"Yes—but I should not think you would like them."

Martha hoped that this repartee would check Louisa's attack on her, but it only gave the young girl the opening she wanted.

"Why do you say that? You never saw me till five minutes ago. Why do you think so badly of me?" She laughed as she spoke.

Martha's nervous flush deepened; it was terrible to have to speak freely to such a stranger, and to a fashionable stranger who seemed to her to belong to the same species as Lady Mary Penruddock; for Martha could never recall the time passed with Maurice's mother without a keen soreness.

"I cannot think badly of you," she said, but she kept her eyes away from her companion. "for I do not know you."

Louisa laughed.

"Now, Miss Burridge"—she put up her mouth

in the coaxing way she thought irresistible—"you imply that I like gaiety and frivolity, and all sorts of things that you and Kitty turn from with disdain. I know you had a mental thankfulness—people always have when they say that sort of thing; it's just as if you said—'Thank God, I like dulness; I'm not foolish enough to like anything different.'"

Martha's eyes dilated till they looked almost black. Louisa had determined to rouse her, and she had succeeded.

"You are judging me wrongly, Miss Ralston," she said, gravely, "and you know nothing about me."

Louisa smiled.

"I am cleverer than uncle, after all, I've wakened the statue," she said to herself; "and yet he generally manages to make a woman talk to him." Then she went on aloud—

"Yes, indeed I do. I have heard so much of you from my sister; Kitty is devoted to you; it is for the sake of being near you that she so much wished to come here."

Martha glanced quickly at her companion. She fancied this girl was hoaxing her ; but Louisa looked in earnest, and, spite of herself, a warm feeling of pleasure crept round Martha's heart ; for the moment she forgot Oliver's engagement, and remembered that first interview with Gyneth, and the strange fascination which Miss Ralston's gentleness had created. She had, then, been real all through, and not acting a part, as Martha thought, to please Oliver.

"It was kind of her to speak so well of me," she said, when Louisa had just given up waiting for an answer, and was beginning to speak.

"Our Kitty is always kind, you know," the bright young girl said. "I wonder if—if your brother will call her Kitty, or if he prefers Gyneth ; of course he might call her Gynny, but that would be hideous—one expects a creature to ba-a, who is called Gynny—don't you think so?"

Martha smiled ; she felt as ill at ease beside this gay chatterer, as a lioness might feel beside a frolicsome kitten, and yet she was amused.

"I prefer your sister's own name to Kitty," she

said, stiffly, though she did not mean to be stiff.

“But we did not finish our discussion, you know,” said Louisa, confidentially. “If you have always been to dull places, perhaps you would like the lively ones better if you tried them; you would have a great success, you know, at a fashionable watering-place.”

Martha smiled more easily; she felt less afraid of her companion as she listened to her chatter.

“A success!” she said. “I have nothing to make me succeed.”

Louisa laughed merrily.

“Oh, that’s delicious; I must take you in hand,” she said, saucily, “just as I did Kitty when I first came home from school. She knew how to dress, because she had a good dressmaker, and our mother and Aunt Venables had always been good dressers; but Kitty took no pleasure in it, and she cared scarcely anything for society, and now she really looks stylish, doesn’t she? and I’ve tried my best to teach her that she is a singularly charming girl.”

“Your sister is quite different from me,” and Martha thought with growing admiration of Gyneth’s sweet face, “and I am sure I should not like crowded fashionable places.”

Louisa sighed, and looked at her companion from head to foot.

“I am afraid of irritating her,” she thought, “so I cannot say quite what I like; but it is miserable to see good looks so wasted, and I believe she is clever, too, if she would only let herself go.”

“Well,” she said aloud, “I should like to take you to Cowes, and, if you would give yourself quite up to my guidance, I am sure you would like it.”

Martha laughed. They had now turned into the avenue, and Mr. Venables and Gyneth were walking beside them. Louisa darted a triumphant glance at her sister.

“Perhaps,” she went on, “it might annoy you at first to be stared at, but that soon wears off, you know, and after a little you would feel like a queen receiving the homage due to you.”

Martha reddened, and held her head up stiffly.

“I daresay you think I am silly,” Louisa went on, “but even Kitty says people have no right to shut themselves up; either they can give pleasure to others, or others can find pleasure in benefiting them. I am quite sure it is vainer to stay out of the world than to go into it.”

Louisa looked so extremely wise and serious that it was impossible to imagine she was joking. Martha struggled against her pride and the reserve which made her resent Louisa’s home-thrusts.

“You may be right,” she said, “and I may be wrong, but people must be what they are—they cannot help being shy and unlike others if they are made so, and then they are best alone.”

Louisa sighed; she was almost tired of her impracticable companion. The make of Martha’s gown annoyed her extremely; she began to wonder if she had made it herself.

“How do you amuse yourself in this charming cottage of yours?” she said—“on a rainy day, for instance.”

“I read,” said Martha.

“But you cannot read all day.”

Louisa's brows looked fretful ; she wished to keep the whip-hand, as she expressed it, over Oliver's sister, and a love of reading took Martha at once into an inaccessible region ; it would have been so much more suitable for this shy, unpolished woman to have been addicted to plain sewing and housewifery—even a little dressmaking would have given a point of sympathy.

“Why not?” Martha said, simply—“at least, of course, one does not actually read all day, but one has to think over one's reading.”

She stopped, surprised at finding herself talking so freely, and with a sudden consciousness that Louisa's eager listening had ceased. But Mr. Venables had been listening too ; he thought that Miss Burridge had been monopolized quite long enough.

“How do you manage for books down here?” he said. “There is no library nearer than Ryde.”

“I brought some with me.”

Martha was overwhelmed at finding herself

the subject of conversation, and she answered stiffly. Louisa was brimming over with triumph; she left Martha's side, and, crossing the road, placed herself by Gyneth, and pinched her arm. But Mr. Venables did not intend to be defeated; he had heard with his own ears that Miss Burridge could talk, and he resolved that she should talk to him.

"What kind of reading do you like?"

He assumed that air of extreme interest which he usually found irresistible with a woman. Unfortunately for his success, Martha did not look at him as she answered.

"I have not many books," she said, abruptly, "but I like old ones best."

"There we are quite in sympathy," Mr. Venables said, eagerly. He was beginning to feel the strange power which Martha exercised; he was really anxious to please her now. "I would rather read Shakespeare or the Spectator than any modern trash."

Martha looked at him with a long, suspicious glance.

"I have read some very clever modern books,"

she said, "and I don't like the Spectator."

She did not like Mr. Venables, and she could not see why he should try to talk to her.

"Not the Spectator!—but you do like Shakespeare and Milton, I expect. Do you like Milton?" he went on, pertinaciously. "A far finer poet than Dante, I think."

Martha smiled.

"I prefer Dante," she said; "I like Dante better than any other reading."

Mr. Venables was discomfited; he had not thought this handsome creature would prove learned, and, though he had a well-read wife, he could not bear learning in other women.

Mrs. Venables had always been bright and lively and full of sparkling talk, and then in her husband's eyes she was so far above other women that it must be right for her to be what she was; but he had feared that his niece Gyneth was too fond of reading, and that in the end reading would make her hard and gloomy; it seemed to him that for this Miss BurrIDGE study was simply poison.

"Don't you find it dull to keep to one author?" he said.

"I never find Dante dull; he is so full of variety; but I read other books."

There seemed nothing more to be said, she was so evidently resolved not to be communicative.

"Is the coast picturesque beyond Foreland?" he asked. "We have not tried that way yet."

"Very," she answered; "a great white cliff rises out of the sea at the end of the bay, and so shuts out the view of Sandown."

"Do you sketch?" he asked.

"No."

Martha smiled, spite of herself, at his perseverance.

"Your brother sketches, I know." Mr. Venables changed the subject abruptly to Oliver. "We must look out some points of view for him. Kitty, when do you expect him? Miss Burridge, have you heard from him lately?"

At last he had produced a change in the pale,

impassive face. Martha smiled and flushed with pleasure as she answered.

"I heard from my brother this morning," she said; "he hopes to come the beginning of next week."

She glanced across Mr. Venables at Gyneth to see the effect of her words, but Miss Ralston's sunshade screened her face.

"Not before!" said Mr. Venables. "But I'm glad he's coming; we must try to make the place as pleasant to him as we can."

"Oh, uncle," Louisa had grown very tired of holding her tongue, "you need not trouble yourself, Mr. Burridge will enjoy himself without our help."

Martha was silent; she looked straight before her, wondering what would be the result of Oliver's visit—wondering, too, how she could make her escape from Mr. Venables.

All at once, a little way in front of them, a gate in the hedge opened and a lady came out. Martha knew at once that this must be Mrs. Venables, and she thought how wonderfully life-like had been Oliver's description of the small,

slender woman, with her soul looking out at her dark eyes—a soul which seemed too intensely full of life for those delicate features and that fragile body.

“This is Miss Burr ridge, my dear,” her husband said, and at once a tiny hand clasped Martha’s warmly, and the dark, loving eyes were full of motherly kindness.

“I hope you are better,” Mrs. Venables said. “You will come in and rest, will you not?”

“Oh no, thank you!” for though Martha was softened by Mrs. Venables’ face and by her gentleness, still another stranger added to all that had gone before was too much for her; she was ready to run away to avoid this dreaded visit.

But Mrs. Venables had been shy too, long ago, and she read the working face easily.

“Well, then, not to-day; you will come with your brother.”

“He is coming next week,” said Mr. Venables.

When Martha had said good-bye, Gyneth followed her.

“May I go part of the way with you?” she said. “I must speak to you; your brother must not come till he has heard from me.”

CHAPTER V.

AN ARGUMENT.

MARTHA could not explain to herself why she now felt so much more at her ease with Gyneth than when she had first met her on the sands at Bemford. She had so shrunk from Mr. Venables, and from Louisa, and even from Mrs. Venables as a fresh stranger, in spite of the attraction of her charming face and manner, that Gyneth seemed to have grown familiar to her. She was no longer some one to be afraid of. Gyneth, too, had been longing to see Martha again; her mind had never quieted from the strange trouble of that day when they sat together on the yellow rocks near Foreland. Martha's words had stirred her strongly then,

and had made her sorry that they had met again. This talk seemed to have given Oliver a fresh claim on her affection, and yet she could not yield to it. She did not understand the strange longing which impelled her to seek the friendship of the sister, when each day made her more sure she could never love the brother. It would have been surely better to avoid every possible chance of seeing or hearing of Oliver; and besides this, her last meeting with Martha had produced none of the results of a happy friendship. There was none of the genial enjoyment Gyneth had counted on as she looked forward to meeting Miss Burrridge again; yet the unaccountable fascination that drew her towards this silent, abrupt woman was even stronger to-day than it had ever been—a fascination that had in it a certain indefinable fear.

“I am glad you have come, I wanted to see you alone,” Martha said, abruptly, as they turned into the path on the side of the cliff. “Have you been thinking about Oliver?”

Gyneth grew red, and then pale.

“There is no use in thinking of him—I cannot feel as you wish me to feel.”

“I don’t understand you.” Martha looked sternly at the face half turned away from her. “I cannot make out why you came to see me at Fulham if you did not really care for Oliver.” Then, as a thought which had come before repeated its warning, she said—“Perhaps you did care for him then—have you changed since?”

Gyneth looked round involuntarily, and the eyes of the two women met; but, spite of the intense questioning in Martha’s glance, there was no self-betrayal in Gyneth’s.

“No,” she said, “I have not changed towards your brother; I have always felt friendship for him; I feel it still, and I wish he had not disturbed it. He has robbed me of a friend I valued very much.” But she smiled brightly at Martha, and her smile exorcised the stiff manner that was gaining on her companion. “It was not only for his sake I wished to see you.”

Martha shook her head, but her lips had lost

their firm line ; they were quivering with suppressed feeling.

“I cannot think anyone can care to know me,” she said. “You will soon tire of a person who has nothing to say.”

Again Gyneth smiled, and it seemed to Martha as if the warmth of those sunny glances touched her heart—the poor hungry heart that so longed unconsciously for love.

“You are not the best judge,” Gyneth said ; “besides, I had heard a great deal of you before I saw you.”

“From Oliver?” Martha spoke eagerly, with the keen curiosity that sometimes tormented her about small matters.

“Partly from your brother, but his friend, Mr. Penruddock, spoke of you too. Don’t you remember I told you so?”

Gyneth’s dress was caught by a bramble at this moment, and Martha was glad that she was free from observation, while her companion stooped over the stubborn red spray that had hooked itself into her fragile skirts. Martha longed to ask what Maurice had said of her,

but timidity conquered, and she went back to the subject of Oliver.

"I should like to have you for a sister," she said, but her manner was so out of harmony with her words that, if Gyneth had not suddenly looked up and met her eyes, she could scarcely have believed the avowal.

"Thank you," she said, warmly; "let me be your friend instead, and may I call you Martha?"

Martha made no direct answer.

"If I am your friend," she said, "I may advise you; I wish you would not break off with Oliver. Have you written to him?"

Gyneth was troubled.

"No, I have not written. But you puzzle me," she said. "If I had a brother I dearly loved, I could not bear him to marry a girl whose affection he was not sure of; I should try to make him give her up."

"No, you would not." Martha spoke with sudden vehemence. "You might at first dislike the engagement, as I did, but if you knew what love was, and saw that your brother was

in earnest, you would feel it was hopeless to say a word against it, you would try your utmost to help him ; you may give up my brother, Miss Ralston—though remember you have made him love you—but he will never give you up. I know Oliver ; he will love you all his life.”

Gyneth shivered ; she recalled Oliver’s strong will—the masterful way he had of forcing people to see things only from his point of view, and she felt that this woman whom she almost loved was as strong and as determined as Oliver. Would it be possible—could they force her to believe herself wrong, and make her act against her own secret convictions ?

The sea was shut out by a tall wilderness of rosy flowered agrimony, while the wooded cliff rose steeply on the other side of them as they walked along. Gyneth felt imprisoned, physically and morally ; it seemed to her that, if she did not soon get into a freer atmosphere, Martha might extort a promise which must for ever bind her to Oliver, for, if she once promised, the girl knew that she should keep faith.

Martha looked at her once or twice ; she saw

that Gyneth had quickened her pace; she saw, too, that she looked flushed and excitable, and that she kept her eyes steadily on the path before them. Martha felt angry; she thought Gyneth ought to be grateful for Oliver's devotion, and she was angry with herself too for having, as it were, put him at the girl's mercy. She grew paler still, and walked on in silence.

They were among the pine-trees now, and there was the sea "panelled" by the red stems of the blue-green pines. They were no longer alone, for the tide was out ever so far, and there was an immense stretch of yellow sands and brown rock to tempt the Bemford visitors this morning. A few quiet-looking mothers and nurses sat on the shingle with books and sewing in hand, while a handful of boys and girls paddled for shrimps, dug for lug-worms, and tormented the innumerable miniature crabs that sometimes made the sands seem in motion. There was no disturbing element, only the sight of human life made a break on the close companionship of which

Gyneth had grown afraid. The spell which had kept her silent loosened its hold ; she glanced shyly at her companion.

“You think me very ungrateful,” she said, “but indeed I am not; I wish I could make you believe how sorry I am that this has happened.”

“I could never believe it; I must always think you encouraged Oliver. I saw his love for you long ago, and you must have seen it too.”

Gyneth grew red.

“Then you think I am not speaking the truth?” she said, sadly.

Martha could not help looking at her ; the wistful, tender eyes had no anger in them, but there was unmistakable truth in their expression of entreaty.

“I suppose I ought not to say that, but at least you deceived him and yourself too—you surely know that when a man singles out a girl, as he sought you, he loves her; it seems to me that you could have known this, Miss Ralston.”

Gyneth sighed.

“You may be right,” she said, “only I believe that if, as you said just now, I had tried to win your brother’s love, I should have understood him better than I seem to have done. But does not this very insensibility of mine show you how unfit I am to be his wife?—there is plainly none of the sympathy between us which I believe is necessary to love.”

Martha still walked on, her pride was deeply wounded; she longed to tell Gyneth that she was not worthy of Oliver, and that his love for her was a mad infatuation, but she was checked by a lingering hope that the girl might yet yield.

“It is possible,” she said, gravely, “that yours is a cold nature, and that the feeling you have for Oliver is the strongest you are capable of; if this is so, you would be safe in marrying, though he deserves all the love of a most loving heart. But if this is not the case”—she fixed her eyes on Gyneth’s, and it seemed to the girl as if they burned with intense feeling—“if it is only that your feelings have not been yet awakened, I tell you not to think of Oliver—

better make him unhappy now, even though his disappointment clouds more than one year of life, than blight him altogether in the future by giving your love to a man who is not your husband."

Gyneth shrank back, for Martha had grown vehement as she went on.

"No," she said, faintly, "you are talking of what would be impossible; but I am glad that you see at last that it is wrong to marry without love. I confess I could not understand you before."

But Martha had only listened to her first words, and was eager to answer them. She was very tired, and yet she could not bear to sit down and rest—movement helped to quiet her excitement.

"Love is never impossible," she said, "and that is why a girl is wicked who marries without it. Her heart may be hard enough to centre all its love on self, but even this is a risk, for women who are selfish in all else will love with heart and soul—how is a woman to help herself who, having married without love, or hav-

ing mistaken a mere fancy for love, suddenly finds that she loves really, and is loved by a man who is not her husband?"

"It cannot happen if she is good," said Gyneth.

Martha smiled.

"Does love only come to wicked women?" she said. "I never said a woman must yield to her love, but she will have put herself into temptation, and she will have a hard fight to escape."

Gyneth shrank into herself; she knew that Martha was speaking the truth. All at once her companion turned on her.

"Good-bye, Miss Ralston—I cannot help being rude, and you cannot like my company; you and I could never understand one another. Some day, when you have learned what love is, you will know what a woman—I mean, what Oliver feels now. It will perhaps be only just if you, too, love in vain; then, perhaps, if this happens, you will wish, when it is too late, that you had chosen the man who loved you, instead of the man you are loving so blindly

and who does not even see your love." She stopped, and put her hand to her side. "I daresay you think me ignorant and exaggerated—perhaps I am—but you will love some day, and then you will understand all I have been saying. Good-bye."

She turned away, but Gyneth followed her. She had understood far more than Martha knew that she had betrayed.

"Tell me this," Gyneth said—"surely you do not mean that a girl could go on loving a man who does not care for her? I can understand that she loves him at first, but surely, when she finds out that he does not care for her, or has tired of her, would not her self-respect make her struggle against her love?"

Martha had frowned when Gyneth began to follow, but at this she stopped in her walk.

"I told you we could not understand one another," she said. "I do not say that a woman who is slighted will show her love, but how can it injure self-respect to be true to her own feelings? Suppose she has known this man all her life, that he has inspired her with

every good feeling she has, that she has raised herself by the thought of him, and by trying to make herself what she thinks will please him—suppose this going on for years, with no hope of return—such love as I am thinking of keeps no thought for self—do you mean to tell me, Miss Ralston, that such a love as this is wrong? Whom does it injure? It lives on itself, and asks no return—how could it hope for it, when it feels its own deep unworthiness?”

There was such a pathetic ring in her last words—such a sad, sweet look in those deep eyes, glowing just now with intense feeling, that Gyneth was strongly moved.

“Such a love as that,” she said, “would be very beautiful, but it seems as if it would be idolatry to give it to any but God.”

“How can one love God?” Martha spoke with sudden harshness. “How can one love an idea? Love clings to a person—to something one can see, and know, and serve—show love and—do things for—live for——”

Gyneth looked at her tenderly; she took her hand between both hers.

“It seems to me one can do all things for God,” she said, “and I suppose that is really why it is so much happier to love a good person—because one can love God’s presence in him.”

Martha drew her hand away.

“We can never understand one another,” she said. “Please let me go now——”

CHAPTER VI.

GYNETH'S LETTER.

“**Y**OU will love some day, and then you will understand all I have been saying.”

The words repeated themselves to Gyneth as she went back through the pine wood. It seemed as if they had got into the far-off roll of the waves which were returning more noisily than they had gone out, for the wind had risen stormily and the fir cones were rattling down the side of the cliff, and sometimes a branch or two came with them ; once a ragged bough fell so suddenly from overhead that it nearly struck her cheek.

She faced the wind as she came up, and she felt exhausted and breathless before she reached the

top. There was a projecting spur of cliff here, and a seat had been placed on it under the shade of a group of pine-trees. Gyneth sat down, and then realized how utterly incapable she was of going any farther—she was exhausted by her own agitation.

Martha's words had let in light with a vengeance; there was no shelter of darkness left for the feelings she had tried to hide from herself. And how pitiful she had been, how much braver and truer Martha was; she loved and did not deny her love, and yet by her own confession—for Gyneth felt sure that she had spoken of herself—her love had not been returned.

For a moment Gyneth wondered who it was who had mastered the heart of this shy, silent woman, but she only wondered for a few moments. There was one man who had known Martha all her life—had been her friend when they were both children, and Oliver had spoken of Maurice's first visit to the cottage and the joy he and his sister had felt in renewing the old friendship. There could be no doubt that

Martha loved Mr. Penruddock. A dull ache—that worst form of sorrow—hung at Gyneth's heart, it felt leaden, it seemed as if it could never throb again with hope or happiness. But, besides the light they had let in on her feelings, so many ideas had been created by Martha's words that Gyneth sat for some time more stupefied than able to reflect. And when a sorrow of this kind reaches us, although the very numbness the blow has caused proves its severity, yet we seem for some time to stand side by side with it—blinded, unable to see what it has done to our lives.

Hope lives on in a mechanical fashion, as it lives in those who watch the last days of a dying man—they cannot see the impossibility that a new comer or those farther off in feeling know too well.

The first active feeling that stirred Gyneth was resentment against herself. This poor Martha, who had never known any of the soft joys of life, who had never been petted or made much of—for, long before that first interview at Fulham, Gyneth had gathered that Oliver

had been worshipped by his sister, and had looked on her as necessary to the comfort rather than to the enjoyment of his life—this lonely woman had found out a happiness for herself, and Gyneth had felt no sympathy.

“He may care for her, though she cannot see it yet; even if I had a right to think he cared for me, could I be base enough to wish to rob her of the one joy of her life?”

And then Gyneth smiled at herself. What chance had she of being preferred to this noble, beautiful woman by a man who had penetrated through the veil which obscured Martha's grand nature from others, and who had had every opportunity of becoming attached to her? But yet, even when this first feeling was quieted, and Gyneth's self-reproach sank under a consciousness of inferiority to Martha, the weight of sorrow hung at her heart as heavy as ever. It was as if she had looked into that wonderful lens which sees through all the brilliance and beauty of the eye the dark disease within it; the impression or fancy which had come between her and any possible affection for Oliver

Burridge had been given its rightful name and character by Martha's glowing picture. Gyneth shivered when she thought of seeing Maurice Penruddock after she had become the wife of any other man.

"I do not feel as intensely as Martha does,"—she put her hand over her eyes; even up there, high above the chance gaze of any inquisitive spectator, she was ashamed of the feelings she had so long hidden from herself—"but mine is the same feeling, and how can I tell what it might grow to? I must fight and pray against it—but oh! will it leave me?—and yet I have been preaching to Martha what I shrink from myself."

She sat thinking, thinking; she must depend wholly on herself. How strangely it had been ordered, she thought, that the two points on which Martha's simple strong mind might have helped hers were unapproachable between them! Oliver's name spoken by her seemed to make his sister angry, and then there was this new subject on which confidence was impossible.

“Why did I choose her for a friend?” the poor girl said. It was equally impossible to confide to her aunt this secret, which must be hidden even from herself. Gyneth saw that she had begun to love a man who cared nothing for her—who probably loved another woman; but until this love was conquered, rooted out of her heart for ever, she would never listen to the love of anyone else. Martha’s words came back, and she shuddered.

“I can understand now,” she said, “the sad stories one hears about worldly marriages, and I see now why people wish for divorce, and I never could understand before; it used to seem so wrong for a wife not to love her husband. Oh! it must be dreadful—dreadful to feel that you can never be free, that there you are fettered for life, and yet that every thought of other love is a sin against God as well as against your husband, and yet the power of loving comes from God as much as any other feeling does. What a puzzle it all is!”

She rose up, and began to walk home hurriedly, without even a glance at the fresh

beauty of the sea rolling up stormily to greet the rocks again, lines of white foam breaking over its surface, and uttering a dull, menacing roar as it flung its treasures heavily before it on the sand.

“After all,” she said, “I am a pagan—I forget that God is all-merciful, and all-powerful as well, and that He can give strength to conquer misplaced love, and repentance also, for I suppose people without religion do not see that this is a sin ; but still I don’t see how a woman who marries one man, while she loves another, can expect to be helped. I scarcely see how she can even pray against a temptation which she has deliberately chosen, and I—oh ! instead of feeling so wretched, how intensely thankful I ought to be that I have seen this before it is too late !”

She went on faster ; it seemed to her that she must not lose a moment before she wrote to Mr. BurrIDGE—some obstacle might come in the way, and he might appear at Bemford before her letter reached him.

Lunch was nearly over when she got

home, and Louisa was in the porch, anxiously watching for her, her spring-like face drawn down, and her fair forehead puckered.

“Kitty darling, where have you been?—did you go all the way home with the sister-in-law?”

The words jarred on Gyneth’s over-wrought feelings.

“No; please don’t tease, Louy,” she said, coldly, and she shrank from her sister’s kiss.

Louisa arched her fair eyebrows.

“I’m growing jealous.” She was following Gyneth into the dining-room, and could not see the pain in her sister’s face. “I expect you to like Martha Burrridge, of course, but it seems to me you are fonder of her than you are of Oliver himself; if I were he, I should object to the arrangement.” Then, seeing Gyneth shake her head as they went in together, she patted her on the shoulder. “You are hungry,” she said, “and not fit to argue; I quite agree with Meg Merrilies on that point. After lunch I want you to take a walk with me, and show me all the lions of the place.”

"Very well," Gyneth nodded ; she wished to get away to her own room to write her letter, but she shrank from doing anything unusual—she did not want anyone to have an idea of her intention till it was actually accomplished.

Louisa hovered round her like a restless bird.

"I will go and get my hat," she said, at last. "I see you will be ready in five minutes."

Gyneth was troubled.

"I cannot go out for an hour," she said. "I am going to my room."

Mrs. Venables had been perplexed ever since Gyneth came in, she read agitation so plainly in her face.

"Your sister is tired, give her time to rest." She smiled so playfully at Louisa that the girl never suspected a tenderer motive in her aunt's words. "And I want you, Louy ; your uncle has a plan for driving round the island, and it seems to me you would like to go with him."

"Why don't you go with uncle?" she said. "I'll take care of Kitty."

Mrs. Venables smiled.

"I could not leave you here alone," she said ;

“and, besides, I am not well enough to travel just now. Come into the other room with me, and we can plan it by ourselves.”

Meantime Gyneth had gone upstairs, and was seated at her table trying to write to Oliver ; she tried more than once, and at last, in despair, she took up a pencil and began to scribble a rough draft of this formidable epistle.

“I have always said only cold-hearted people copy letters,” she said ; “and yet all I am anxious for is to spare him pain. I must try to think of his feelings only, and keep myself out of sight.”

It was troublesome to know how to begin ; she had written him one or two notes since she had known him, and had addressed him as “my dear Mr. Burridge.” This seemed too friendly now.

“And yet,” she said, at last, as she leaned back in her chair and looked wearily at the blank paper, “I like him as a friend as well as ever ; why should I not be quite simple and honest, and try to make him see my real feelings.”

“My dear Mr. Burridge,” she began ; but

there was a long pause before any more was added, and even when the words began to come, and she found herself writing fluently, she often struck out sentences and added words, fearing so much to give him pain. At last she felt that she must end; she was not satisfied, but still she doubted whether she had power to do better, and she copied it out fairly, and then read it over.

“MY DEAR MR. BURRIDGE,

“I know that I am going to grieve and disappoint you, but I think you will believe that I am very sorry to do it. I have tried earnestly to find another way, but I cannot. I know that I cannot love you as you wish; my feeling for you is just the same as it was when I first knew you—a mixture of admiration and friendship, it can never be anything else. Pray believe me, and spare us both the pain of discussing this again; I care for you far too much to make you miserable. Some day you will have forgotten this fancy, and you will find some one who really deserves your love and can give you

her whole heart in return; then we can be friends again. I can never forget you, or cease to value your friendship, but I do not love you as a girl should love her future husband. Please forgive me for not having been firmer before in what I knew was the truth.

“Sincerely yours,

“GYNETH RALSTON.”

“It will grieve him—I can’t help it,” she said, sadly—“but it will surely prevent him from coming to Bemford. I could not go through an interview with him—oh, no!”

CHAPTER VII.

SUCCESS AND DEFEAT.

ALL this while Oliver had been at Awlford, passing from one triumph to another. Even Mr. Hawkes allowed the marvellous success of the improvement; it not only saved time and labour in a surprising manner, but the finish it gave to the woollen fabrics could not have been believed; it did the work of three machines in one by its ingenious combination. Oliver's illness, and his magnanimous refusal to prosecute any of his assailants, although it was said that he had recognized more than one among them, had greatly impressed the sullen workmen; and, when the news of his return spread, there began to be meetings among the

refractory hands. At last a deputation of these fellows waited on him at the inn ; they sent him a message, stating that they wished to express their satisfaction at his complete recovery.

“It has given universal satisfaction among us,” the spokesman said, with a flourish of his dirty hands.

Oliver thanked them heartily, then he looked from one pale, half-starved face to another, noticed their ragged clothing and their wretched plight. He smiled sadly, for he was thinking of the wives and children.

“You have something else to say to me, my men—isn’t it so?”

The spokesman, a small, one-sided fellow, hitched his crooked shoulder forward, and peered at Oliver through the tangled tufts of brown hair that fell over his eyes—eyes that looked hollow and keen with hunger.

“We has to say this,”—he was a southerner, but, as his tongue was glib, his mates had set him on to speak for them—“if the masters will meet our views, we’re agreeable ; we cannot speak no fairer.”

A big, fair-haired Lancashire lad shouldered him aside. He looked better fed and better clothed than the others, but more determined.

“Gin t’ maisters be reasonable, nobbut else,” he said—“doan’t yo’ think we’s gi’en in, Maister Burridge?”

Oliver laughed at him, with the frank hardihood that had always made him popular among the hands.

“Get along with you, Tom,” he said. “I’m not going to listen to you before your elders. What do you know of the value of wages compared with Bill Evans or George Pearson, who have wives and seven or eight little ones? I am glad of the chance of speaking to you quietly,” he went on. “I am one of the masters now, as you know, and, in inventing this improvement, I think of your good as much as of the house itself. If our trade increases, and orders for work pour in, we shall be able to pay higher wages; and the beauty of this improvement is, that it enables us to more than treble our supply without a corresponding increase of either hands or working hours, so

there's no need to send for foreign workmen, if you stand by us."

The men looked at one another, awkward and silent; the Lancashire giant stood by sulkily. At last Oliver said—

"Well, will you come up to the works with me, and we'll talk to the masters together? Come along," he said, not waiting to let them demur—"I am going there directly."

There was in Oliver's determined manner a power very difficult to resist. Bill Evans tried to speak, but Oliver's reminder about the wife and children had been well timed, and it fairly stuck in his throat. Bulky Tom lurched himself forward, as if he meant to protest, but the man Oliver had designated as George Pearson, a tall, gaunt creature, with a deeply-lined face and a bent body, gripped Tom's arm roughly.

"Keep quiet, lad, cannut yo'!" he said; "yo' kens nowt—t' maister is reet about it."

He held the Lancashire lad back while Mr. Burridge passed out at the door, and beckoned them all to follow; then Oliver stood aside, and let the heavy-shod feet tramp noisily downstairs.

He did not attempt to precede them, so as to see the masters before they came up. He quite understood how large a growth suspicion had in the minds of the hands, and it seemed to him that this was a first-rate chance for winning their confidence.

He found Mr. Fildon in Mr. Hawkes's room, but he did not go in. Standing at the door, he pointed over his shoulder to the men behind him.

"They want to speak with you," he said.

Hawkes made signs to him to come in, but Oliver took no notice.

"We will go in the yard and wait for you," and he turned and led the way out.

A sudden idea had come to him, and he resolved to act on it; he would show the men the improvement himself. There might be traitors among them; there might be some who would take advantage of this confidence, and try to injure the work; but though this thought passed through his brain, Oliver did not hesitate.

"It is my own," he said—"I will risk it."

He turned to the men and explained his intentions; there was silence first, and then old George Pearson cheered; the rest took up the cheer, and it reached the office where Hawkes and Fildon still lingered.

"What game's he up to now?" said Hawkes, suspiciously.

Fildon laughed.

"No harm, that I'm sure of. You're not given to trust, I know, Hawkes, but it occurs to me that in the long run you'll find it pays better to believe in Burridge than to doubt him; he's as sharp as a knife, and as true as steel; but as restive under doubt as a yearling in harness. I expect you'll find he's brought the hands back to their senses."

Hawkes shrugged his shoulders.

"So like you!" he said. "I wonder you're not tired of trust, Fildon. You're a deal too old to believe in human nature as you do—you might be twenty, you're so green. No, I think years were sent to teach, and they've taught me to trust no man I haven't a hold on."

Fildon shrugged his shoulders this time, and

they both went into the yard. Very soon Oliver came out of the room where his improvement was worked, followed by the deputation. Hawkes swore a strong oath.

“He is mad!” he said—“he must be to have run such a risk as that. Why, the very sight of that, or such as that, would have turned me mad, I know.”

Fildon looked surprised. Everyone knew that Hawkes had once been a hand himself, but he did not often allude to his early life. Oliver came forward and joined the two partners.

“It is all right,” he said, loud enough for all to hear him; “the men understand the invention, and see its use; they wish to be taken on again.”

Then he stood aside, and let Bill Evans explain matters. Bill had evidently been accustomed to public speaking, and cleared his throat, and put himself in an attitude before he began, while his less loquacious comrades looked at him admiringly, and then looked round at each other, proud of being represented by such a champion.

Hawkes was not in a peaceful mood ; it was near dinner-time, and the brute element in him was rampant. Mr. Fildon saw this, and felt nervous. Just then the postman came into the yard, and walked across to the letter-box on the office door. Mr. Fildon looked quickly at Oliver.

“You and Mr. Hawkes must go and see the post,” he said ; “I can settle this matter without you—can’t I, Hawkes ?”

Hawkes was in daily expectation of an invoice from a Burgundy wine-grower, about some first-rate wine, and as foreign letters always came by the midday post, he snapped at the bait Fildon put out. But he looked crossly at Oliver ; he was resolved not to leave him behind, for it seemed to him that the young fellow was becoming a great man much too quickly in Awlford without the years of apprenticeship which Mr. Hawkes thought a necessary diploma of merit.

“Come among us a stranger, and he’s put no money in the mill neither”—this was his usual answer when Fildon launched out in

praise of his favourite—"from the south, too, they say!"

Now, with an extra sour look over his shoulder, he spoke civilly, for he remembered Fildon's hint that unless he made things pleasant young BurrIDGE would as likely as not take his wares to a better market; and, spite of his contradictory nature, he was compelled to admit to himself that this youngster's invention promised a golden future to the firm, if they could work it speedily before it got talked about, and perhaps copied.

"Come away, then, BurrIDGE," was said so smoothly that Oliver had no excuse but to follow him, though he wanted to see how Mr. Fildon would settle with the men.

Hawkes went on quickly, and was watching the sorting of the letters before Oliver came into the office.

"Here's some for you," then he gave a sly wink; "in lady's handwriting, too."

Oliver frowned, and felt angry that he could not keep down a flush of excitement that would burn on his cheeks as he recognized Gyneth's

writing. The other letter was from Martha; he crammed that into his pocket, but held Gyneth's tightly clasped in his hand, and, turning away abruptly, went into his own room. He shut the door close, and then, standing with his back against it, smiled in anticipation of the luxury before him. He had not expected a letter so soon, and this fact, which would have put a nature less confident than Oliver's on its guard, had no significance for him.

He read the letter through. At first, though he frowned and pressed his firmly-cut lips close, he did not look deeply troubled; he had made up his mind, he told himself, to these little scruples from Miss Ralston. He believed that some girls never knew their own minds, and that the best way was not to listen to them. He resolved that his engagement should be as short as possible, he was so sure that she must love him in the end. But the second reading brought a deeper frown, and his heart felt heavy when he had ended the letter.

There was no question about the degree of

love she felt for him ; it was plain that she wished him to think she did not love him at all—she did not even wish to see him again till he was married to some one else.

Oliver stood still and rigid, only the swelling veins on his temples and the brows drawn lower and lower over his eyes showed that he suffered.

He roused at last.

“I am not a boy nor a woman,” he said. “I am not going to give up just because she does not understand her own feelings. ‘Never give up,’ has always been my motto. If she can tell me face to face that she has no love for me, then—well, I suppose I must accept it ; but she will never do this.”

The frown cleared, and he smiled.

“I never gave up anything yet that I did not carry out,” he said. “Why should I fail with her?—other men marry the girls they love. I’ve heard of men proposing to the same girl several times, and getting her at last. I am growing faint-hearted.”

He had forgotten all about his other letter, and, not caring to be shut up with his own thoughts, he opened his door and went into the passage, where he met Mr. Fildon face to face.

“I was looking for you,” Mr. Fildon said, in a very cheerful voice. “Come in here, will you, unless you are in a hurry for the public ovation which I fancy you will get in the yard?”

Oliver followed him; he seemed suddenly to have lost all interest in the mill and its concerns.

As soon as the door was closed on them, Mr. Fildon said—

“We owe you a great deal, Burrage; the men have pledged themselves to come back on the old terms. I have promised, however, that if the improvement fulfils our expectations there shall be a rise before Christmas. Now Hawkes and I must make you a proposal; for I take it for granted you wish to stand by the old mill.” Oliver nodded. “Very well,” Mr. Fildon went on; “come out and dine with me this evening,

or to-morrow, whichever you like, and we can talk matters over."

For an instant, a strong disgust held Oliver. He could not force his mind back to all these outside matters, but the next instant his strong practical wisdom showed him that this would perhaps bring the help he wanted. It was quite possible that he could make terms with his partners which would put him at once on an equal footing with them, and enable him to marry; then, if he could only get Gyneth to say Yes, he would take care that she had no chance of changing her mind.

"I will come to-night," he said. "I have to go south to-morrow."

"Ah!" Mr. Fildon smiled, "I suppose you will be bringing a wife among us before long, eh, Burridge? I hoped you would have found one of our Yorkshire lasses to suit you—they are rare housewives."

Oliver turned away. Half an hour ago he would have owned his attachment, but, although he would not confess himself defeated, a sense of defeat clung to him, and in this mo-

ment of good fortune, when life seemed to be opening a golden future, he felt less self-confident than he had ever felt before.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



